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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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PHOTO: PTI

Didi writes to PM over deactivation of Aadhaar in Bengal

KOLKATA, 19 FEB

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking to know the reasons behind the "sudden deactivation" of Aadhaar cards that has caused a "hue and cry" among people in the state. She also asserted that such a "deactivation" exercise was against regulations and in gross violation of natural justice. "I wish to bring to your kind notice a sudden development of the serious nature of indiscriminate deactivation of Aadhaar Cards of the people, especially those belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBC communities in West Bengal," Banerjee said in a letter to Modi. *—PTI*

TN to cover higher education expenses of transgenders

CHENNAI, 19 FEB

Tamil Nadu government announced that it will cover all educational expenses, including tuition and hostel fees of transgender people who want to pursue higher education. Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu made an additional allocation of Rs 2 crore to the Tamil Nadu Transgender Welfare Board while announcing his 2024-2025 Budget on Monday. The state also announced Rs 44,042 crore for the School Education Department. Tamil Nadu was the first state to constitute an exclusive welfare board for transgenders during the 2006-2011 DMK rule. The government in 2021 extended the free bus travel for women in town buses to people from the transgender community. *—Agencies*

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SC says no new zoo, safari without its approval

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Any fresh proposal for opening a zoo or starting a 'safari' on forest land will now require the approval of Supreme Court, which on Monday issued a slew of directions for forest conservation across the country. The top court said the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change will put all the details on "forest-like area, unclassed forest land, and community forest land", to be provided by the states and UTs, on its website by 15 April. On 27 March 2023, the Centre had introduced the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill. The pleas challenge the constitutionality of the amended law. *—PTI*

India hosts Milan naval exercise; 50 countries take part

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

India on Monday kick-started a nine-day mega naval exercise in Visakhapatnam with participation of around 50 navies that came amid the fractious geopolitical environment including growing global concerns over deteriorating security situation in the Red Sea.Navies from the US, Japan, Australia, France, Bangladesh, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, among others, are participating in the 12th edition of the 'Milan' exercise that is aiming to bolster maritime cooperation.*—PTI*

SC to examine C'garh mayoral polls ballot paper, video today

SC voices concern over horse-trading, slams returning officer

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Voicing its deep concern over "horse-trading", Supreme Court said on Monday it will examine on Tuesday the ballot papers of Chandigarh mayoral poll and video recording of the counting. The court said instead of ordering fresh polls, it may consider declaration of results on the basis of votes already cast.

It ordered that the ballot papers and video that have been taken into custody by the Registrar General of Punjab and Haryana High Court, be produced before it at 2 pm.

A bench of Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud and Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra directed that the necessary security arrangements shall be made to ensure the safe transit and proper preservation and custody of ballot papers along with judicial officers.

The bench slammed Anil Masih, Returning Officer, saying he must be prosecuted for defacing ballot papers *PHOTO: ANI*

The bench slammed Anil Masih, Returning Officer for the Chandigarh Municipal polls, saying he must be prosecuted for "defacing ballot papers".

The apex court was hearing a plea of AAP's councillor Kuldeep Dhalor after the BJP won the mayoral election following the Returning Officer's move of scrapping eight opposition votes.

AAPs councillor Dhalor lost the mayor election to BJP's Manoj Sonkar on 30 January.

Sonkar resigned from his post on 18 February.

The bench asked Masih why he had made marks (ticks and x marks) on the ballot papers he was tasked to count.

"All that you say... if any falsehood you will be prosecuted... Why were you looking into the camera and putting marks in the ballot papers?" asked Chandrachud.

Masih, who was present in court, replied that he was just marking the ballot papers that were defaced and that there were so many cameras that he was just looking at them.

He added that he had made the marks on eight ballot papers, only to set them apart.

"That means you marked it. He has to be prosecuted. In an electoral democracy, this cannot be allowed," the bench said.

On the last date of the hearing, the top court came down heavily on the returning officer who held the Chandigarh Mayor elections saying he was "murdering democracy".

The observations of the apex court came after it watched a video of the controversial election.

BJP's Sonkar bagged 16 votes against the 12 votes received by Dhalor despite having 20 councillors. The action of rejecting eight votes of the AAP-Congress alliance as invalid had sparked allegations of vote tempering.

AAP councillor challenged a Punjab and Haryana High Court order that refused to grant any interim relief to the party seeking fresh mayoral polls in Chandigarh. *—ANI*

STAYS HC ORDER

SC relief to CM in 2022 protest march case

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Supreme Court on Monday stayed proceedings against Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and others in connection with a protest march held in the state in 2022.

A bench of justices, Hrishikesh Roy and Prashant Kumar Mishra, also issued notice to concerned respondents on Siddaramaiah's plea.

Justice Mishra also remarked that if politicians stage a protest, the criminal case has to be quashed but what about the normal citizens who are protesting.

Siddaramaiah and others have moved the Supreme Court against the HC order rejecting his plea seeking quashing of proceedings against him in the 2022 protest matter.

The top court also stayed the high court order, which had imposed a fine of Rs 10,000 on him as well as Congress general secretary and Karnataka in-charge Randeep Singh Surjewala, state ministers MB Patil and Ramalinga Reddy, and

Supreme Court *PHOTO: PTI*

directed him to appear before a special court on 6 March.

The case was registered against Congress leaders after they took out a march to lay siege to the then Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai's residence in Bengaluru, demanding the resignation of KS Eshwarappa, who was then the rural development and panchayat raj minister in the southern state.

The agitation was staged after a contractor, Santosh Patil, died by suicide accusing Eshwarappa of demanding a 40 percent commission for public work in his village. Senior Advocate Kapil Sibal, for petitioners, argued that his clients have a fundamental right. *—PTI/ANI*

Farmers reject Centre's proposal, to continue protest

CHANDIGARH, 19 FEB

Farmers leaders taking part in the 'Delhi Chalo' agitation on Monday rejected the Centre's proposal of procuring pulses, maize and cotton at MSP by government agencies for five years, saying it was not in farmers' interest and announced that they will march towards the national capital on Wednesday.

"We appeal to the government that either resolve our issues or remove barricades and allow us to proceed to Delhi to protest peacefully," farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said.

In the fourth round of talks with farmer leaders, a panel of three Union ministers on Sunday proposed buying of pulses, maize and cotton crops by government agencies at minimum support prices (MSP) for five years after entering into an agreement with farmers.

Earlier on Monday, Samyukta Kisan Morcha, which spearheaded the 2020-21 stir, rejected the government proposal, saying it seeks to "divert and dilute" the farmers' demand for MSP and they will accept nothing less than the 'C-2 plus 50 per cent' formula for MSP as recommended in the Swaminathan Commission report.

After the talks with the farmer leaders on Sunday night, Union minister Piyush Goyal said, "Cooperative societies like the National Cooperative Consumers Federation and National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India will enter into a contract with farmers who grow 'tur dal', 'urad dal', 'masoor dal' or maize for buying their crop at MSP for next five years." *—PTI*

Govt helping farmers, says Modi

Lucknow, 19 Feb

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Monday that his government was helping farmers to take agriculture on a new path, and laid focus on natural farming and millets. Addressing an event in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh, Modi emphasized the importance of working towards a common goal of having Indian food products on dining tables across the globe.

HEALTH OFFICERS PROTEST

Health officers under Akhila Karnataka State Community Health NHM Contractual Employees' Union (AKSCHCEU) protested at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Monday demanding the government to release 5% of their annual salary and 10% loyalty bonus which has been withheld *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

SP OFFERS 17 LS SEATS TO CONG, SAYS WILL JOIN YATRA AFTER SHARING FINALISED

LUCKNOW, 19 FEB

Congress has been offered 17 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh, Samajwadi Party said on Monday. It also asserted that its chief Akhilesh Yadav will join Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Raebareli only if the proposal is accepted.

"We have given a final offer of 17 Lok Sabha seats to Congress. Akhilesh Yadav's participation in Nyay Yatra in Raebareli on Tuesday will depend on their acceptance," Rajendra Chaudhary, Samajwadi Party's chief spokesperson said. He, however, refused to identify the seats offered to Congress.

Gandhi-led yatra will pass through Amethi on Monday. It will then enter Raebareli, where Samajwadi Party chief had earlier said he would join.

A Congress statement on Sunday said party chief Mallikarjun Kharge would join the yatra currently in Pratapgarh in Amethi.

Samajwadi Party had earlier offered 11 seats to the grand old party while Congress' state unit demanded a higher allocation. *—PTI*

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Sandeshkhali: NCW demands Prez rule, CM's resignation

KOLKATA, 19 FEB

NCW chairperson Rekha Sharma on Monday demanded the resignation of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and imposition of President's Rule following unrest in Sandeshkhali, evoking a sharp retort from TMC, which accused the panel of echoing the BJP's agenda.

Sharma, who led a delegation of National Commission for Women (NCW) to the unrest-hit area in North 24 Parganas district, said the visit was aimed at bolstering confidence among women to speak out about their experiences.

In New Delhi, BJP MP Locket Chatterjee slammed the TMC government and said what happened to women in Sandeshkhali was a reminder of atrocities against women in countries like Iraq and Pakistan.

The demand for imposition of President's Rule came days after the National Commission for Scheduled Caste (NCSC) recommended the same in its report to President Droupadi Murmu on alleged harassment of women by TMC supporters in Sandeshkhali.

Rekha Sharma *PHOTO: PTI*

"I think the chief minister should resign," Sharma said while talking to reporters. Sharma's visit comes after a two-member team of the commission took stock of the situation in the area last week and submitted a report.

Reacting to Sharma's allegations, the TMC asked why she does not go to BJP-ruled states where similar allegations were raised.

"Manipur was burning for the last several months. Did the BJP chief minister resign? Did they impose President's Rule there? The commission should act impartially and should not act as an extended office of the BJP," she said.

The panel is just parroting the agenda of the BJP, TMC state vice-president Jaiprakash Majumdar said. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 4

Azad claims Abdullahs met Modi before Article 370 move

SRINAGAR, 19 FEB

The National Conference hit out at former Jammu and Kashmir chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad on Monday for his comments that NC Chief Farooq Abdullah and his son, Omar Abdullah, were consulted before the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, saying he has "stooped so low" by making "baseless and senseless allegations".

Farooq Abdullah, who is the Lok Sabha MP from Srinagar, said it was a sad day to see "Azad stooping so low in his political utterances only to remain in the political circuit. A leader like him should not be circulating what he himself has termed gossip". Azad also accused Farooq Abdullah of playing the religion card to woo Hindu votes by visiting temples and singing "bhajans".

Ghulam Nabi Azad *PHOTO: PTI*

- Azad said he, along with several others held a meeting with Modi ahead of 5 August, 2019 decision

"He has to clarify actually which side of the fence he was on. He has been enjoying every perk even after ceasing to be a member of the Rajya Sabha. The question is, how?" the NC leader asked.

The former Union minister said he, along with several other leaders, held a meeting with Modi ahead of the Centre's 5 August, 2019 decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir's special status.

"Whatever we have to do, we do it in broad daylight. Why should one ask for time at night...?" Abdullah asked and described Azad's statement as childish and laughable. *—PTI*

TO CREATE 1,650 JOBS

Tata, Air India to invest ₹2.3K cr in K'taka

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

Tata Group companies Air India and Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL) plan to invest Rs 2,300 crore in State for projects providing employment to about 1,650 people.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Large and Medium Industries Minister MB Patil were among those present at MoU signing ceremony.

Air India is planning to set up a Maintenance Repair and Overhaul (MRO) facility and "create" City as the aviation hub in South India. "The investment for the project is around Rs 1,300 crore. This will ensure direct employment generation of 1,200 people," it said.

Air India is planning to set up a MRO facility and create Bengaluru as the aviation hub in South India *PHOTO: PTI*

According to a National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) study, the hub creation will increase the passengers handled by eight MPPA (Million Passengers Per Annum) thus giving direct and indirect employment opportunities for 25,000 to 26,000 people due to a boost in business activity, support staff and tourism in Karnataka.

TASL is planning to set up three projects with investment of Rs 1,030 crore -- Passenger to Freighter Aircraft Conversion facility (Rs 420 crore), a gun manufacturing facility (Rs 310 crore) and Aerospace and Defence Research and Development in Karnataka (Rs 300 crore).

These projects would generate direct employment for 450 people.

TASL's plans to source more than 50 per cent of its 13,000 parts from Karnataka for its gun manufacturing facility, which is estimated to provide employment to 2,000-3,000 people in 300-350 small and medium enterprises, it added. *—PTI*

HDK wooing our MLAs for RS polls: DKS

He alleged that Kumaraswamy is making phone calls to Congress MLAs offering bribes

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar has alleged that former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy was trying to buy votes for the upcoming Rajya Sabha elections.

Shivakumar told reporters that he has information that Kumaraswamy is making phone calls to Congress MLAs and offering them bribes. He also said that BJP is trying to engineer cross-voting in the election.

The former chief minister said Congress is not working on any counter strategy to secure votes for Rajya Sabha elections. "We don't need it. People have elected 136 MLAs from Congress and two Independents are with us." he said. Shivakumar also emphasised that he has a good personal bonding with rebel MLAs ST Somashekar and Gopalaiah.

When asked about Congress leaders Kamal Nath and Manish Tiwari leaving Congress and joining BJP, he dismissed them as rumours. "BJP is spreading lies. Kamal Nath is a senior Congress leader and he is not going anywhere. He has worked closely with the Gandhi family for the last 50 years. I know Kamal Nath for the last 35 years; he is a man of ideology and values. Manish Tiwari too is a senior leader and he won't join BJP. Congress will remain united as long as Gandhi family is there and the country will remain united as long as Congress is there," he said replying to a query.

DK Shivakumar *PHOTO: PTI*

> **If BJP was strong, why is it trying to attract Congress leaders? If they are confident of winning 370 seats, why would they need leaders from other parties**
>
> -DK Shivakumar

"If BJP was strong, why is it trying to attract Congress leaders? If they are confident of winning 370 seats, why would they need leaders from other parties?" Referring to some Ministers refusing to contest the Lok Sabha elections, he said, "The Party will decide who will contest the polls and everyone has to respect the decision."

Pointing out BJP's Opposition to change the slogans in schools, he said, "I don't have much information on that. We are spreading the message of Kuvempu who has promoted the concept of universality. BJP is trying to politicise everything. They are only interested in playing with emotions and feelings rather than livelihoods."The ruling Congress, which has 135 MLAs in the 224 member Assembly, with the support of Darshan Puttanaiah from Sarvodaya Karnataka Paksha and two Independents is expected to retain three seats out of the four RS seats. BJP and JD(S) with 66 and 19 members, respectively, are in a position to jointly win one seat in the elections, in which MLAs will vote.

—Salar News with Agencies

Bengaluru gears up for 9-day Karaga festival

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

The vibrant Bengaluru Karaga festival is scheduled for 15 to 23 April. This nine-day event, rooted in the Thigala community's traditions, draws huge crowds of devotees from across the City. The official dates were confirmed by the Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowments Department. Former member of the Karnataka legislative assembly A Jnanendra will once again hold the honour of being the Karaga bearer, continuing a cherished tradition. The highlight of the festival is the majestic Karaga, an earthen pot adorned with flowers and topped with the idol of Draupadi. The festival has a history of over 300 years. A night-long processions starting from Dharmarayaswamy temple, is expected. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: SALAR

Wild jumbo knocks down electric pole in Sakaleshpur

MYSURU, 19 FEB

A wild elephant, in search of food, attacked an electric pole in Shidgalale village, Sakaleshpur, on Sunday. The pole collapsed onto a house and led to a power cut. A bystander notified the Forest Department about the situation and rushed to the spot. A herd of 20 wild elephants have been wreaking havoc in the Hebbanahalli, Hosakoppalu, and Masuvalli areas for the past fortnight. The tuskers have destroyed crops and posed a threat to residential properties. Krishnappa, a villager, noted that two months ago, forest officials translocated six pachyderms from Hassan to Bandipur, but the menace has not stopped. *—Salar News*

VHP, BD protest against St. Gerosa school teacher

MANGALURU, 19 FEB

Activists of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal on Monday staged a protest near the Clock Tower in Mangaluru demanding action against a teacher at the St. Gerosa School who allegedly made derogatory remarks against Hindu religion while taking a class. They also demanded withdrawal of cases filed against BJP MLAs Vedavyas Kamath and Y Bharath Shetty, VHP leader Sharan Pumpwell and corporators Bharath and Sandeep Garodi for protesting outside the school. It is alleged that Sr Prabha, a teacher at St Gerosa School had made some offensive remarks against Hindu religion while teaching Rabindra Nath Tagore's poem in the class. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: SALAR

Registration begins for Agniveer recruitment

KARWAR, 19 FEB

Mangalore Army Recruitment Office has announced the opening of applications for Agniveer recruitment in Uttara Kannada. It has pledged support for the process, including free training. The process will involve a written test followed by a recruitment rally, with free training provided by the Ex-Servicemen's Welfare Association. Candidates between the ages of 17.5 and 21 years with a minimum qualification of SSLC or PUC are eligible to apply for recruitment. Positions will be offered for both technical and general duties, based on the candidate's qualifications. Successful candidates can expect to earn a starting salary of Rs 30,000. Those interested can apply through website https://www.joinindianarmy.nic.in, with the last date for submitting applications being 22 March. *—Salar News*

BJP demands action on illegal factories after fire incident

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

A police case to probe a fire incident in a perfume factory on the outskirts of Bengaluru which claimed three lives triggered a discussion in the Karnataka Assembly on Monday about illegal factories in residential areas of the City.

Invoking the fire incident, which also left five persons injured, BJP alleged in the Assembly that illegal factories were operating in residential areas in the City posing risk to residents. According to police in the district headquarters town of Ramanagara- about 50 km from Bengaluru- the factory was engulfed in flames in Sunday's incident sparking loud explosions which rattled the neighbourhood."We have registered a case and started an investigation. The owner of the factory is among the deceased. We have to identify the deceased and injured. We are looking out for the land owner who leased his property to run the factory," a police officer said. Yashwanthpur BJP MLA ST Somashekar said that the kin of those killed, and the injured should be given compensation as they were from economically weaker sections. Leader of Opposition R Ashoka pointed out that this was the fifth incident in the City in the last few months -- the first one being the major fire tragedy in a cracker warehouse at Attibele Town on Bengaluru outskirts bordering Tamil Nadu. *—PTI*

BJP alleged ithat illegal factories were operating in residential areas in the City posing risk to residents *PHOTO: SALAR*

KSRTC to get 1,000 new buses by April: Minister

Bengaluru, 19 Feb

Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy in State Assembly said governmnet will release 1,000 new Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) buses by April to improve last-mile connectivity. He was responding to Congress MLA DG Shantana Gowda concerns about the severe shortage of buses connecting taluks in Karnataka, especially in the districts of Davangere, Shivamogga, and nearby areas 49 new administrative buildings to come up in new taluks. *—Salar News*

Administrative buildings for new taluks

Bengaluru, 19 Feb

Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda announced 49 new administrative buildings in the new taluks formed after 2018. Gowda said 1,000 assistant village administers will be employed by this year and the government will provide them training. *—Salar News*

MLA flags lack of medical facilities

Bengaluru, 19 Feb

KGF Congress MLA Rupakala in State Assembly raised concerns over the lack of medical facilities in Kolar. She pointed out the shortage of doctors and said the district has just a taluk hospital with 150 regular beds and that region is facing health issues. *—Salar News*

FRUIT FEST

Visitors takes a look at the varieties of grapes and watermelon arranged during the Grapes and Watermelon Fair at HOPCOMS organised by the Department of Horticulture in Bengaluru on Monday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Kuvempu's slogan change sparks row

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

State government on Monday amended the long-standing slogan by Kuvempu at the entrance gates of Moraji residential schools leading to a controversy.

The slogan which said, "This is a temple of knowledge, come inside with folded hands," was changed BJP and JD(S) leaders protested in Assembly demanding immediate action on the incident. The Opposition leaders have criticised Congress government, accusing it of "brainwashing" children and creating societal confrontation.

Former chief minister Basavaraj Bommai said the change by Congress was to gain political mileage through societal division. BJP State President BY Vijayendra alleged that the change reflects an "anti-Hindu" sentiment within Congress.

Leader of the opposition R Ashoka questioned the change in during the Assembly session. He flagged concerns over the lack of ministerial oversight and accused Chief Minister Siddaramaiah of losing control over its administration.

Meanwhile, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said that BJP is spreading misinformation.

—Salar News

Kodagu faces severe drought

MADIKERI, 19 FEB

Kodagu, known for its lush greenery and scenic beauty, is now facing a severe drought crisis, as five taluks in the district have been declared drought-prone this year.

The scanty rainfall has resulted in drinking water shortages that could impact several villages across the district.

The district headquarters, Madikeri, is the worst affected even before the onset of summer. The city is facing an acute water shortage, and there are concerns that the hot and dry weather in the next three months might exacerbate the situation.

Water levels have depleted in the Kootu Holey Dam, which supplied water to the city, and the Roshanara Lake has dried up, leaving only a meagre amount of water that will last only until Wednesday. To replenish the Kootu stream and to ensure a sufficient drinking water supply for Madikeri, authorities are now using water from the Kundamestri Check Dam. In light of the crisis, Madikeri Municipal Commissioner Vijaya has urged residents to conserve water and abstain from wasting it. The Zilla Panchayat Executive Officer Varnith Negi stated that the district administration has identified at-risk villages and formulated contingency plans to supply drinking water to affected communities. The district administration has also identified villages that are expected to face water scarcity, and the Tehsildars of the respective taluks have been directed to devise effective strategies to mitigate the crisis. *—Salar News*

The scanty rainfall has resulted in drinking water shortages that could impact several villages across the district *PHOTO: SALAR*

DYFI REFUSES TO REMOVE TIPU SULTAN CUT-OUT

MANGALURU, 19 FEB

DYFI has refused to remove a cut-out of Tipu Sultan erected at their local office as part of their Karnataka state conference to be held at Thokkottu near here from 25 February.The Konaje police station inspector had served a notice to the president of the Harekala unit of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) on Sunday, instructing to remove the Tipu Sultan cut-out placed near their office as the organisation had not taken prior permission for erecting it in a public place.DYFI District President BK Imtiyaz said that as part of the state conference, they are using the cut-outs and flex banners of social reformers, and that the government had no right to place a ban on banners. *—PTI*

High court sentences man for sexually harassing minor

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

The Karnataka High Court has sentenced a 28-year-old man to three years in prison and imposed a fine of Rs 10,000 for sexually harassing a minor school girl in 2014. This comes after the court overturned the earlier judgement by a lower court that had acquitted the accused.

Justice Srinivas Harishkumar, head of the Division Bench, passed the order after considering the criminal appeal petition of the prosecution. According to the police statement the incident occurred on 26 October, 2014, in Chikkamagaluru district. The man, then 18, was a labourer at a coffee estate. He allegedly held the girl while she was walking on the road, dragging her into a public toilet. He reportedly kissed and groped her despite her attempts to avoid him. The victim somehow escaped his clutches and informed her parents about this incident.

High Court *PHOTO: PTI*

- However, the prosecution, headed by KP Yashoda appealed to the High Court, arguing that the evidence, including the victim's statement, clearly established the crime

The victim's father filed a complaint with the police, but the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Special Court in Chikkamagaluru acquitted the accused, citing inconsistencies in the statements of the victim's parents and deeming the victim's testimony unreliable.

However, the prosecution, headed by KP Yashoda appealed to the High Court, arguing that the evidence, including the victim's statement, clearly established the crime. The court agreed, emphasising that the lack of bystanders did not negate the incident.

The court also rejected the plea of the defence for leniency under the Probation of Offenders Act, citing the seriousness of the offence committed under the POCSO Act, which does not allow any such leniency. *—Salar News*

Vijayanagara Empire gets featured in game

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

It is that time of the year when State goes all out to celebrate Vijayanagara Empire (Hampi Utsav 2024 was held between 2 and 5 February). But this year's biggest tribute to the medieval Hindu empire, which at its peak and ruled most of the south, stretching its boundaries to Odisha and Maharashtra even, comes from America.

A mathematics professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Saverio E Spagnolie, has designed a board game brd on the early strategic growth of the empire, along with three other designers – Mathieu Johnson, Cory Graham and Aman Matthews – and developer Joe Dewhurst.Vijayanagara: The Deccan Empires of Medieval India, 1290-1398,' published by GMT Games, is the first game in its new Irregular Conflicts Series, which explores more complex interactions than counter insurgencies or COIN games.Spagnolie said the team got together to participate in the first Consim Game Jam, a contest for designers to produce a game prototype in three days.

In 2008, it released 'Chandragupta,' designed by Stephen R Welch, as part of their Great Battles of History series of games on ancient warfare. In 2017, it released 'Gandhi: The Decolonization of British India,' designed by Bruce Mansfield, considered non-conventional among gamers because COIN games rely on violent wars unleashed in the annals of history while Gandhi employed a non-violent method to win his war. *—PTI*

HELPLINE IN CRISIS

Vanitha Sahayavani faces staff shortage

BENGALURU, 19 FEB

Bengaluru City Police established Vanitha Sahayavani (women's helpline and counselling centre) in 1999 to provide support to women in distress. However, shortage of staff to manage the workload has hindered its effectiveness.

The City is home to three Vanitha Sahayavani centres, which are attached to Malleswaram, Basavangudi and Infantry Road police stations. Each centre is staffed with two counsellors and one police sub inspector and they handle more than 20 complaints daily. Additionally, there is one person dedicated to managing the helpline and scheduling appointments. These centres operate under the Deputy Commissioners of Police in the City.

The services provided by the centre include telephonic counselling, rescuing women in crisis, supporting those facing domestic violence, harassment and abuse, as well as offering family counselling and rehabilitation. Besides, couples seeking counselling walk in most of the days.

The services provided by the centre include telephonic counselling, rescuing women in crisis and abuse *PHOTO: X/ BCPPARIHAR*

Two counsellors at a centre are not enough to manage more than 20 cases in a day, an inspector at Vanitha Sahayavani centre, who didn't wish to be named, told Salar News. "Many a times, counselling sessions take hours and we can manage only 5-10 cases daily. People dropping by usually wants immediate counselling, apparently due to the gravity of their problems. The workload often results in a waiting period of 1-2 weeks for a counselling session. This delay is forcing many to withdraw the complaints, worsening their psychological and mental health," the inspector said.

The police department should double the staff strength, then the only the centre serve its intended purpose to the society, the inspector said.

Besides, some people visiting the centre are not seriously seeking redress, the inspector said. "Many couples who seek counselling are not genuinely interested in receiving help. This leads to wasted time and resources, preventing the centre from assisting those with genuine needs." Domestic violence, however, remains on top of the list of a number of complaints received at the centres. Out of these, over 25 per cent are filed by men claiming harassment by women. *—Salar News*

HELPLINE NUMBERS FOR WOMEN IN DISTRESS

- **Vanitha Sahayavani helpline number:** 080-22943225, 080-22943224
- **Sakhi:** 08026538977, 9164069641
- **Tara Women's Centre:** 080-25251929
- **Nava Karnataka Mahila Rakshana Vedike:** 9490135167
- **Abhayashrama:** 080-22220834, 080-22121131
- **Vimochana**: 080- 25492781 / 82 / 83

Kerala CM cautions against rift among religions

THIRUVALLA, 19 FEB

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Monday cautioned against concerted efforts to create a rift among religions and religious beliefs in the country. Instead of nurturing harmony, cooperation and coexistence between religions, such forces are consciously trying to create division between them, he said. He was speaking during 75th birthday celebrations of Theodosius Marthoma Metropolitan, head of Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church, here. Without naming any particular political party, outfit or individual, he said some forces were capable enough to create a rift even among those who should stand united and create confusion in the society about whom or what should be opposed. In such situations, a humanitarian approach and interventions being made by personalities like Marthoma Metropolitan within the church and outside give hope to the society, he added. —PTI

4-time Cong MLA & ex-Rajasthan min Malviya joins BJP

JAIPUR, 19 FEB

Four-time Congress MLA and former Rajasthan minister Mahendrajeet Singh Malviya on Monday joined BJP, in a setback to the grand old party in the state. Malviya was welcomed to the BJP by the party's Rajasthan in-charge Arun Singh, state unit chief CP Joshi and other leaders. He said there is a double-engine government in Rajasthan, referring to the BJP dispensations in the state and at the Centre. "Development is a big issue. There is a double-engine government here. The state and the country are transforming and the entire world is watching," he told reporters before a joint press conference at the party office. BJP swept to power in Rajasthan in the Assembly elections late last year. The saffron party had won 115 seats while Congress, which governed the state between 2018 and 2023, managed victory from 70.—PTI

Ahead of LS polls, T'gana BJP to hold 'yatras' from 20 Feb

HYDERABAD, 19 FEB

Gearing up for Lok Sabha polls, BJP in Telangana would conduct 'Vijaya Sankalp Yatras' (mostly roadshows) across the state from 20 February to 2 March. Union Minister and State BJP President G Kishan Reddy on Monday offered prayers at the famous temple of Goddess Bhagya Lakshmi at Charminar here and launched the 'Raths' to be used in the 'yatras'. He told reporters that five 'yatras' would be held simultaneously touching all the 119 Assembly constituencies in the state. The 'yatras' would begin at different places in the state on 20 February. Observing that there is an atmosphere all over the country in favour of Narendra Modi becoming Prime Minister for a third term, he expressed confidence that the BJP would win majority of the total 17 Lok Sabha seats in Telangana. BJP had won four constituencies in the 2019 General Elections.—PTI

'Nyay Yatra' on pause over case hearing

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Congress General Secretary in Charge Communications, Jairam Ramesh on Monday said Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra will be paused on Tuesday morning as Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has been issued a summon to appear before the District Civil Court in Sultanpur in a defamation case. Notably, Gandhi has been summoned by MP/MLA court on February 20 in connection with a 2018 case over using derogatory remarks against Union Home Minister Amit Shah in a Bengaluru conference. Santosh Kumar Pandey, a lawyer who appeared for Vijay Mishra said Congress MP Rahul Gandhi can be given a maximum punishment of 2 years if sufficient evidence is found against him.—PTI

TN presents Rs 49k cr revenue deficit Budget

Govt allocates Rs 1,500cr for Adyar river restoration

CHENNAI, 19 FEB

Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin with Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu, in Chennai on Monday PHOTO: PTI

- **Thennarasu made a number of announcements in various sectors including housing, education and infrastructure.**

Tamil Nadu government on Monday presented the 2024-25 budget, estimating the revenue deficit at over Rs 49,000 crore and made new announcements aimed at achieving the "7 grand Tamil dream" which included social justice and women's welfare.

Also, Rs 1,500 crore has been allocated for restoration purpose of 42km-long river Adyar. Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu presented his maiden budget, a paperless, e-budget. Thennarasu said the Union government "continues to stifle our state by exercising arbitrary and discriminatory control over our finances." Further, he said: "The imposition of stringent conditions on the borrowing ceiling by the Union Government has unduly restricted the ability of the State to raise resources to fund its development initiatives."

The revenue deficit in the Budget Estimates for 2024-25 is pegged at Rs 49,278.73 crore. The fiscal deficit in Revised Estimates 2023-24 is estimated to 'marginally increase' to Rs 94,060 crore as against Rs 92,075 crore in Budget Estimates.

The fiscal deficit as a percentage of GSDP has increased from 3.25 per cent in Budget Estimates to 3.45 per cent in the Revised Estimates 2023-24, owing to a downward revision in the GSDP estimates.

Citing latest estimates, he said Tamil Nadu has grown at 8.19 per cent in 2022-23 in real terms,as compared to the growth of 7.24 per cent at the national level. The government plans to borrow a total amount ofRs.1,55,584.48 crore during 2024-25 and make repayment of Rs.49,638.82 crore.

As a result, the outstanding debt as on 31st March 2025 will be Rs.8,33,361.80 crore. "This constitutes 26.41 per cent of GSDP in 2024-25," Thennarasu said.

The total revenue receipts of the state government, including the Central transfers, are estimated to be Rs.2,99,009.98 crore in Budget Estimates 2024-25 as against the Revised Estimates of Rs.2,72,576.80 crore in 2023-24.

Through steps such as resource augmentation and improvement in revenue collection efficiency, the state will attempt to maintain a healthy growth in revenue receipts, the minister said.

Thennarasu made a number of announcements in various sectors including housing, education and infrastructure. The total revenue expenditure was estimated at Rs 3,48,289 crore. —PTI

EC ORDER

Sharad Pawar had sought an urgent hearing of his plea in the top court PHOTO: PTI

Sharad faction can use new allotted name: SC

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

- **The bench gave liberty to Sharad Pawar to move the poll panel for allocation of the party symbol**

Supreme Court on Monday directed that Election Commission's order of 7 February granting the name of 'Nationalist Congress Party-Sharadchandra Pawar' for the group led by Sharad Pawar will continue till further orders.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and KV Viswanathan sought a response from Ajit Pawar-led faction on a plea of Sharad Pawar against the order of Election Commission recognising Maharashtra deputy chief minister-led group as the real Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

The bench gave liberty to Sharad Pawar to move the poll panel for allocation of the party symbol and directed the poll panel to allow it within one week of the application.

Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for Sharad Pawar, said that the order passed by EC is an interim arrangement made by the poll panel for Rajya Sabha elections till 27 February.

"The Maharashtra assembly session is scheduled to start from 26 February and our group will be without any name or symbol," he submitted.

Sharad Pawar had sought an urgent hearing of his plea in the top court in the wake of twin blows suffered by the group led by him and the consequential fear of facing action for possible violations of the whip by his MLAs. He had sought an urgent hearing in view of the 15 February order of Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar. —PTI

Delhi CM Kejriwal skips ED summons for 6th time

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Arvind Kejriwal PHOTO: PTI

Enforcement Directorate is expected to issue fresh summons to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for questioning in excise policy-linked money laundering case, official sources said on Monday.

The ED sources claimed that a local court has prima facie held Kejriwal guilty of "disobeying" the earlier notices issued to him in this case, warranting the seventh summons.

Kejriwal, 55, refused to depose before the federal agency for the sixth time on Monday with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) saying the ED should wait for the court's decision instead of repeatedly sending summonses to the Chief Minister.

A Delhi court on 17 February had granted exemption to Kejriwal from personal appearance for the day in connection with the complaint filed by the central agency.

The court posted the matter for 16 March and Kejriwal's counsel assured the court of his physical appearance that day.

ED sources said it had filed a complaint before this court under section 174 of IPC against Kejriwal for "intentionally disobeying" the first three summons. —PTI

'Senior civil servants are threatened'

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal claimed that senior civil servants of Delhi government are not cooperating with the state government in implementing a scheme related to one-time settlement of unpaid water bills, saying that they are being threatened by "higher office," indicating at BJP.

"This scheme was passed by 13 June, 2023. But it has not been implemented yet. For that, it needs to be brought to the cabinet. The Finance Secretary is saying he will not give his comments, and Urban Development) Secretary is saying he will not bring the bill to the cabinet without comments. —PTI

7 BJP MLAS MOVE HC CHALLENGING SUSPENSION

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Seven BJP MLAs moved Delhi High Court on Monday challenging their indefinite suspension from the Delhi Assembly for interrupting the lieutenant governor's address.

Justice Subramonium Prasad listed the matter for hearing on 20 February on whether to grant any interim relief to suspended legislators Mohan Singh Bisht, Ajay Mahawar, OP Sharma, Abhay Verma, Anil Bajpai, Jitender Mahajan and Vijender Gupta.

Senior advocate Jayant Mehta, appearing for the petitioners, said their indefinite suspension till the conclusion of the proceedings before the privileges committee was in violation of the applicable rules. He said the MLAs were consequently unable to attend the on-going Budget session.

He urged the court to facilitate their participation in the session. —PTI

FEMA CASE

Mahua Moitra skips ED summons

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Mahua Moitra PHOTO: PTI

Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mahua Moitra on Monday skipped Directorate of Enforcement (ED)'s summons issued against her last week in connection with irregularities in a foreign exchange contravention case.

ED had issued a summons to Moitra on 15 February, asking her to appear before it on 19 February in the case. She was asked to appear before the agency's headquarters in Delhi with some documents related to some foreign investments.

The agency wants to question Moitra in the case under the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999.

ED investigators want to record her statement linked to the case.

The 49-year-old politician is being probed by Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) too and it is conducting a preliminary inquiry into the allegations against her on the reference from the Lokpal.

Moitra has been in controversy since BJP MP Nishikant Dubey accused her of asking questions in Lok Sabha to target Adani Group and PM Narendra Modi at the behest of businessman Darshan Hiranandani in exchange for gifts. Moitra was expelled as a LS MP on 8 December. —ANI

SP DECLARES 11 CANDIDATES FOR LS POLLS IN UP

LUCKNOW, 19 FEB

Samajwadi Party (SP) on Monday declared 11 candidates from Uttar Pradesh for the upcoming general elections with the list also including the name of Lok Sabha MP Afzal Ansari.

The party's announcement comes amid the offer of 17 Lok Sabha seats to the Congress, an alliance partner in the INDIA bloc.

Afzal Ansari, who is the sitting BSP MP from Ghazipur parliamentary constituency, has been fielded from the same seat by the SP.

Supreme Court had in December 2023 conditionally suspended Ansari's conviction in a 2007 Gangsters Act case, saying his constituency will be deprived of its legitimate representation in the legislature since a by-election may not be held given the remaining tenure of the current Lok Sabha.

Of the 11, four hail from the backward community, five from the Scheduled Caste category, Virendra Singh is a Thakur, while Afzal Ansari is a Muslim.

SP has been facing flak from party leaders and alliance partners over not giving tickets to the PDA (Pichhda, Dalit, Alpsankhyak) candidates for the ongoing Rajya Sabha elections.

For Rajya Sabha, voting for which will take place on 27 February, the SP has fielded two Kayasthas -- cinestar Jaya Bachhan and former UP Chief Secretary Alok Ranjan and a Dalit Ramji Lal Suman.

Asked if its list for Lok Sabha polls is a damage control exercise, SP spokesperson Rajpal Kashyap said. "This list has all the elements of the 'PDA' embedded in it. And this is not a damage control exercise." —PTI

- **The party's announcement comes amid offer of 17 LS seats to Congress, an alliance partner in the INDIA bloc.**

Rahul flays govt for ignoring Dalits, Prez

PRATAPGARH, 19 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday said that "not inviting" Dalits, backward and even President to Ram temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya was an insult to them.

"By inviting industrialists and Amitabh Bachchan to the consecration ceremony of the Ram temple, Modi gave the message that the country's 73 percent of people have no importance," Gandhi said addressing a gathering at Lalganj Indira Chowk in Rampur Khas Assembly constituency during 'Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra'.

Accusing BJP government of neglecting 73 per cent of the country's Dalits, backward classes, and tribals, the former Congress president said they are being ignored. —PTI

PDP DISMISSES RUMOURS ON QUITTING INDIA

SRINAGAR, 19 FEB

People's Democratic Party on Monday rubbished reports about the party considering leaving the Opposition INDIA bloc and said it remains committed to the unity of the alliance.

In a post on its official handle on X, PDP said, "Disregard the fabricated news about @jkpdp considering breaking ties with INDIA alliance. We stand firm in our commitment to unity and our alliance. Don't be misled by this malicious misinformation!"

A similar controversy broke out last week when National Conference chief Farooq Abdullah said the party would contest the Lok Sabha polls on its own. —PTI

Red tape replaced with red carpet: Modi

LUCKNOW, 19 FEB

Narendra Modi said an environment of trade, development, and trust has emerged in Uttar Pradesh. PHOTO: PTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said the culture of "red tape" has been replaced with the "red carpet" for investors in the seven years of the "double-engine" government in Uttar Pradesh.

In his address at a ground-breaking ceremony for projects worth more than Rs 10 lakh crore, he said an environment of trade, development, and trust has emerged in the state.

"Seven to eight years ago, one could not even think that such an environment of investment and jobs would be made in UP. Crime and riots were common then and no one would have even believed if anyone said that UP would be developed," he said, targeting earlier governments.

He also took a swipe at Congress, saying the party people believed that the members of only one family had the right over Bharat Ratna and that is why their governments did not confer it on BR Ambedkar for decades.

Modi said he had the honour to confer the award on former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, an iconic farmer leader hailing from Uttar Pradesh.

He said the government will not give up until all 'labharthi' get the benefits of various schemes.

Modi said that BJP's "double-engine" government in Uttar Pradesh has shown that no one can prevent development from taking place if the intention is there. Modi launched 14,000 projects across the state worth more than Rs 10 lakh crore at the fourth ground-breaking ceremony for investment proposals received during the UP Global Investors Summit. —PTI

Modi to join final day of TN padayatra

Chennai, 19 Feb

BJP Tamil Nadu President K Annamalai on Monday said PM Narendra Modi will participate in party's 'En Mann En Makkal' padayatra on its concluding day. Modi will join the padayatra on 27 February and will attend events on 28 February. Annamalai arrived in Chennai on Monday after attending BJP's national convention in Delhi. The padayatra led by Annamalai will enter its 234th constituency Palladam in Tirupur on 27 February.—ANI

Mayawati dismisses rumours of alliance

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

BSP supremo Mayawati on Monday dismissed rumors of forming an alliance ahead of the Lok Sabha polls and asserted that her party will contest the elections on its own. Mayawati, an ex-CM of Uttar Pradesh, has also asked workers of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to be beware of such rumors.

"Keeping in view the interest and welfare of society, particularly the poor, exploited and neglected, BSP's decision is to contest the LS elections on its own with the strength of its people", Mayawati said. BSP contested the 2019 elections in alliance with Samajwadi Party. —PTI

NATIONAL COUNCIL MEET

BJP releases 'Phir EK Baar Modi Sarkar' anthem

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Narendra Modi PHOTO: PTI

The 'Phir ek baar Modi sarkar' campaign anthem was released at BJP's National Council meeting at Bharat Mandapam this weekend, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

The multilingual track features lyrics in 24 Indian regional languages. The song centres around the theme of inclusive development across different sectors, across regions, different cohorts and sections of society, as claimed by the Narendra Modi government.

BJP's campaign slogan 'Phir Ek Baar Modi Sarkar' was announced by party National President JP Nadda in January 2024 where party leaders from across the country had gone and done wall paintings under this theme.

Following a 360 degree approach, BJP has launched the digital leg of the campaign through the release of this title song. The party has also launched the 'Ek baar phir se Modi sarkar' website.

Earlier on Sunday, Prime Minister Narednra Modi said that the past decade at the helm bears testimony to courageous and far-reaching decisions.

Addressing party leaders and supporters on the closing day of BJP's National Convention at the state-of-the-art Bharat Mandapam on Sunday, Modi said, "The last 10 years of our government stands testimony to courageous and far-reaching decisions. We resolved tasks that had been pending for centuries."

Modi had said BJP workers are fortunate to have witnessed 'revolutionary changes' across the country over the last 10 years.

Earlier, on the inaugural day of the national convention on Saturday, BJP passed a political resolution titled 'Viksit Bharat', highlighting the achievements of the BJP-led NDA at the Centre under Prime Minister Modi. —PTI

- **The song centres around the theme of inclusive development across different sectors, across regions, different cohorts and sections of society**

PHOTO: PTI

Efforts on to rescue three abducted Assam miners

TINSUKIA, 19 FEB

Efforts are on to trace three miners from Assam, who have allegedly been abducted by militants in Arunachal Pradesh, police said on Monday. At least three miners were allegedly kidnapped by suspected militants from Febru Basti in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh on Sunday. "Operations by police forces and Assam Rifles are underway. Details will be shared later," a senior officer said. Those who have been kidnapped are identified as Gyan Thapa, Lekhan Bora, and Chandan Narzari but the exact number of abducted persons is not yet known, Tinsukia Superintendent of Police Abhijit Gaurav said. It is not clear whether they were engaged in illegal mining activities.—*PTI*

Upendra Dwivedi becomes Vice Chief of Army Staff

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi on Monday assumed charge as Vice Chief of Army Staff, replacing Lieutenant General MV Suchindra Kumar. Lt Gen Dwivedi was serving as Northern Army Commander in his previous assessment. Lt Gen Kumar has been appointed as General-Officer-Commanding of Udhampur-based Northern Command. Lt Gen Dwivedi is the front-runner to become Army Chief when incumbent General Manoj Pande retires on 31 May. Lt Gen Dwivedi paid homage to the fallen heroes at National War Memorial and reviewed a guard of honor before taking charge of his new responsibility. —*PTI*

Village officer kills self after case against sarpanch

SIKAR, 19 FEB

A 25-year-old village development officer (VDO) allegedly committed suicide by hanging himself from a ceiling fan in his house in Jhadli in Rajasthan's Sikar district. Lalit Kumar's family members have alleged that he was being harassed after he lodged a complaint at Thoi police station on Thursday against Chiplata Sarpanch Manoj Gurjar and former VDO Narendra Pratap for embezzling funds. Police said that he had shared a "suicide note" on WhatsApp groups. On Sunday, his family members found him hanging from the fan. He was taken to a local hospital where doctors declared him dead, they said. Lalit Kumar had registered a case of embezzlement of Rs 5.20 lakh against Gurjar and Pratap on Thursday, police said. —*PTI*

PHOTO: KASHMIR PULSE.COM

Srinagar-Jammu NH closed due to mudslides

SRINAGAR, 19 FEB

Srinagar-Jammu national highway was closed for traffic on Monday due to mudslides triggered by heavy rains in Ramban district. People have been asked to avoid travel on the highway till the weather improves. "Srinagar-Jammu highway has been closed for traffic due to mudslides at Mehad-Cafteria in Ramban and Tabela Chamalwass in Banihal area," an official of traffic department said. Authorities have stopped traffic at various places along the highway to avoid people getting stranded in vulnerable arterial road. —*PTI*

SC stays summon to officials in Sandeshkhali case

The summon was issued by Lok Sabha Privileges Committee

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

The Supreme Court on Monday issued notice to concerned respondents and also stayed the Lok Sabha Privileges Committee proceedings against West Bengal senior officials in the matter relating to the Sandeshkhali protest.

A bench led by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud stayed Privileges Committee proceedings against West Bengal senior officials.

Senior Advocates Kapil Sibal and Abhishek Manu Singhvi, appearing for WB's senior officials, mentioned the plea before a bench led by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud and apprised them of the facts related to the matter.

The plea was filed by West Bengal's Chief Secretary Bhagwati Prasad Gopalika, Director General and Inspector General of Police Rajeev Kumar.

The Privileges Committee had issued notice to the West Bengal Chief Secretary, DGP, and others asking them to appear before it on 19 February.

—*ANI*

SC on Monday issued a notice to respondents PHOTO: ANI

SC junks PIL seeking CBI or SIT probe into violence

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

The Supreme Court on Monday refused to entertain a PIL seeking a court-monitored CBI or SIT probe into the violence in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali village, saying the incidents cannot be compared to the savagery in Manipur.A bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Augustine George Masih said the Calcutta High Court is already seized of the matter."The local High Court will be the best to assess the situation. Let there be no dual forums," the bench said while granting liberty to petitioner. —*PTI*

Delegation led by NCW visits Sandeshkhali

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

A delegation led by the National Commission for Women (NCW) Chairperson Rekha Sharma on Monday left for Kolkata ahead of her Sandeshkhali visit.West Bengal's Sandeshkhali area has been witnessing massive unrest for over 10 days as women protestors are seeking justice against alleged atrocities committed by TMC leader Sheikh Shajahan and his aides.

—*ANI*

HC refuses to hear PIL on protection of women

KOLKATA, 19 FEB

The Calcutta High Court on Monday refused to take up for urgent hearing a PIL seeking protection to women residents ofSandeshkhali area over allegations of sexual atrocities on them by people owing allegiance to ruling Trinamool Congress.The Chief Justice told the lawyer petitioner that the basic requirements of a PIL have to be satisfied for it to be taken up. —*PTI*

Nomadic couple's toddler abducted in Kerala, cops begin probe

T'PURAM, 19 FEB.

A two-year-old girl, daughter of a nomadic couple from Bihar was allegedly kidnapped while she was sleeping in a wayside tent near Pettah here in the wee hours of Monday, police said.

The incident happened after midnight and the missing girl was sleeping along with her siblings and parents in an isolated place near the main road adjacent to All Saints College here, they said.

Soon after the incident, the parents and the girl's siblings rushed to the nearby police station seeking help.

Police sources said according to information provided by one of the girl's brothers, a person was moving around in a two-wheeler in a suspicious manner in the area during the time.As television channels began airing the news, police teams rushed to the spot and carried out searches.

Thiruvananthapuram MLA Antony Raju said an alert had been sent to all police stations and an ADGP level officer was coordinating the investigation."The incident happened around midnight and the police are carrying out a comprehensive probe. Police stations in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam districts and Kanyakumari in neighbouring Tamil Nadu have been alerted," he told the media. —*PTI*

ICICI'S EX-MANAGER

Kochhar case: HC calls out CBI for 'abuse of power'

MUMBAI, 19 FEB

The arrest of ICICI Bank's former Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Chanda Kochhar and her husband Deepak Kochhar by Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in a loan fraud case was "without application of mind and due regard to the law", amounting to an "abuse of power", Bombay High Court has said.

A division bench of Justices Anuja Prabhudessai and NR Borkar had on 6 February held Kochhars' arrest as illegal and confirmed a January 2023 interim order passed by another bench granting them bail. CBI arrested the couple on 23 December 2022, in a Videocon-ICICI Bank loan case.In the order made available on Monday, the court said CBI has been unable to demonstrate the existence of circumstances or supportive material based on which the decision to arrest was taken.

- The court also refused to accept the probe agency's contention

The court also refused to accept the probe agency's contention that the arrest was made as Kochhars were not cooperating with the probe and said the accused had a right to remain silent during interrogation.

The court held that while it was within the domain of the investigating agency to interrogate an accused and to arrive at a subjective satisfaction on the issue, the same was not "wholly immune from judicial reviewability".

The probe agency has alleged that private sector lender ICICI Bank had sanctioned credit facilities to the tune of Rs 3,250 crore to the companies of Videocon Group promoted by Dhoot in violation of the Banking Regulation Act, Reserve Bank of India's guidelines, and credit policy of the bank. —*PTI*

4 cops suspended, others shifted for not acting against sale of 'beef'

JAIPUR, 19 FEB

Four policemen were suspended and other personnel at a police station in Rajasthan's Khairthal-Tijara district shifted to the police lines for not taking action against people allegedly selling meat suspected to be beef, officials said on Monday.

This came after some people were caught while allegedly selling suspected beef in the open in a deserted place in this district, they said.

On information of cow slaughter and selling of beef in the open, several police teams conducted raids in the area and caught some suspects. Jaipur Inspector General (IG) of Police Umesh Dutta said that various teams were formed for combing operations in four districts in the range.

Following information of cow slaughter and beef selling in Kishangarh Bas area, the police detained several people and recovered fresh meat which was sent for testing, he added.

"We have recovered some substance which is being scientifically checked. Some suspects have been caught and detained and are being questioned," he said.

The officer informed that four policemen of Kishangarh Bas Police Station who were in charge of beats in which the substance was found and suspects were caught have been suspended while the remaining staff was shifted to the police lines.

Sources said that one ASI, one head constable and two constables have been suspended while others, including the SHO, were removed from the police station and sent to the police lines.

The police station had 38 policemen. —*PTI*

Myanmarese poachers who died entered India illegally

PORT BLAIR, 19 FEB

A police investigation into the death of six Myanmarese poachers, whose bodies were found on remote Narcondam Island in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, revealed that 10 people from the neighboring country had entered Indian waters illegally to collect marine wealth on 12 February.

Of the 10 Myanmarese nationals, six died of 'starvation' and 'intoxication', while two are still missing in the dense forest and two were arrested.

The startling revelation came following the interrogation of one of the arrested poachers identified as Aung Kyaw Myint.

Of the 10 Myanmarese nationals, six died of 'starvation' and 'intoxication', while two are still missing PHOTO: PTI

Police sources said, these Myanmarese nationals were employed by Kyaw Zar Win, a resident of Labutta (a town in the Ayeyarwady Region of south-west Myanmar), who had provided advance payments to them and organised essential supplies such as fresh water and fuel for their voyage, expected to last 15-20 days.

"Aung Kyaw Myint disclosed that the health condition of Bo Bo Lwin worsened, and he and Lwin decided to surrender on 14 February.

Myint and Lwin left the group and surrendered before police outpost at Narcondam Island.

They were brought to Port Blair where Bo Bo Lwin was admitted to GB Pant Hospital and is undergoing medical treatment.

The ration they were carrying is believed to be d amaged after their dinghy met with an accident," a police officer said.

The bodies of six Myanmarese nationals were brought to GB Pant Hospital in Port Blair —*PTI*

US SCIENTIST SAYS

Cloud seeding, smog towers won't undo pollution

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Improving air quality in India requires long-term effort, a senior US scientist has said and noted cost-intensive technologies such as smog towers and cloud seeding are not sustainable solutions to the pollution problem plaguing the country.

In an interview with PTI, Richard Peltier, a member of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Air Pollution and Health Technical Advisory Group, said there is a good understanding that air pollution is "really quite bad" across India but precision is lacking due to the limited distribution of air pollution monitors.

When asked how much time is needed to control air pollution in cities such as Delhi, he cited the example of the US.

The US implemented the Clean Air Act in the 1960s, Peltier said and added only recently has the country developed air quality that is generally considered good.

"So, it took 50 or 60 years to get here.

This is not an instantaneous problem. This is not something that's going to be resolved with the stroke of a single pen or a law. This takes time ... It is more of a marathon than a sprint," he said.

The scientist said fighting air pollution with cloud seeding technology is not a long-term solution PHOTO: PTI

Asked about the role of smog towers in resolving the issue, Peltier -- also an executive editor of the Journal of Exposure Science and Environmental Epidemiology -- said these giant air purifiers work on a small scale but are impractical for entire cities due to cost and maintenance challenges.

"Do they remove air pollution from the air? Yes, they do. Do they remove an adequate amount of air pollution from the air? Absolutely not. It is like trying to dry up a big mighty river with a bath towel. You just cannot do it," he said.

On fighting air pollution with cloud seeding technology, the scientist said it is not something that is sustainable and certainly not a long-term solution.

Asked if the severity of the air pollution problem in India is underestimated due to a lack of sensors and air quality monitoring institutions, Peltier said, "I don't think we know with enough precision where the pollution is worse. There probably are not enough air pollution monitors spread out across India, especially those around major city areas that give us the confidence that we are 100 per cent sure that our model is right."

"But I think we have a pretty good understanding that air pollution is really quite bad across India. It'd be nice to have more monitors though," he added.

According to independent think-tank Greenpeace India, more than 99 per cent of the country's population breathes air that exceeds the WHO standards on PM2.5. —*PTI*

UAPA invoked over cow shelter worker's murder

KAWARDHA, 19 FEB

The stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act has been invoked in connection with the murder of a cow shelter worker in Kabirdham in Chhattisgarh after a probe revealed suspicious activities of two accused, a police official said on Monday.

Sadhram Yadav,48, was killed allegedly by six people on 20 January night on the outskirts of Kawardha city when he was heading to his village Lalpur on a bicycle. All six were arrested later.

After learning about suspicious activities of accused Ayaz Khan and Idris Khan, a provision of the UAPA was invoked in the case on Sunday, Kabirdham Superintendent of Police Abhishek Pallava said.

The probe has revealed the six murdered Yadav in ISIS style to create terror in Kawardha city ahead of the 22 January idol consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, the SP said.

After examining call details, social media posts and electronic records of the accused, Section 16 of the UAPA, which deals with terrorist acts, was imposed, Pallava said.

The probe has found Ayaz and Idris visited Kashmir and other states in December last year and allegedly met some suspicious persons, including those linked to terror organisations, he said.

They had also allegedly communicated with those linked to terrorist groups, the SP said.

After the incident, a portion of Ayaz Khan's house was demolished by the authorities in Kawardha. —*PTI*

17 INFECTED

2 kids die of 'measles' in MP, schools shut

MAIHAR, 19 FEB

Two children have died of suspected measles, and 17 are infected in Madhya Pradesh's Maihar.

This prompts the district authorities to shut all schools in eight villages for three days, a health official said on Monday.

A medical team has been deployed to prevent the further spread of the disease. "Two children, one of them seven years old, died of suspected measles on 14 February. Another 17 children were found to be infected in eight villages," Chief Medical and Health Officer (CMHO) LK Tiwari said.

Of the infected children, seven are admitted to a hospital. Based on a report, the collector has ordered the closure of all government and private schools in eight affected villages for three days starting Monday and sought a survey of the habitations in the 5km radius of these villages. Collector has also banned gatherings of children at any function in the affected areas.

Samples have been collected from the infected children and sent to Bhopal-based All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) for examination. A team from World Health Organisation (WHO) is also expected to visit the affected villages.

—*PTI*

Installation of a life-size statue led to a verbal altercation between two groups PHOTO: PTI

Goa tense over Shivaji statue installation

PANAJI, 19 FEB

Tension prevailed in a village near Margao town in Goa after some people installed a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, while another group took objection, leading to a police posse being stationed there to maintain peace, an official said on Monday.

The day marks the 394th birth anniversary of the Maratha emperor and events are held across the state to celebrate it.

The life-size statue was installed in Sao Jose De Areal village on Sunday, which led to a verbal altercation between two groups, the official said.

"The situation is under control and police personnel have been deployed in the village," Superintendent of Police (South) Sunita Sawant said.

Goa social welfare minister Subhash Phal Desai, who visited the village on Sunday, said the statue was installed on private land and all permissions from the local panchayat were obtained and the deputy collector was informed."No one must have any objection to the statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Some political forces are instigating locals against the installation of the statue," he said. —*PTI*

PROTEST ON

Farmers with tractors stand on a street in the centre of the Czech capital during a demonstration to draw attention to the poor situation of Czech agriculture in Prague, on Monday. The protest is against the European Union policies in agriculture and unfair conditions for doing their business. Hundreds of tractors and other vehicles blocked a major road in downtown Prague but traffic was not affected
PHOTO: PTI

Julian Assange's long struggle could be ending

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's fight to avoid facing spying charges in the United States may be nearing an end following a protracted legal saga in the UK that included seven years of self-exile inside a foreign embassy and five years in prison.

Assange faces what could be his final court hearing in London starting Tuesday as he tries to stop his extradition to the US. The high court has scheduled two days of arguments over whether Assange can ask an appeals court to block his transfer. If the court doesn't allow the appeal to go forward, he could be sent across the Atlantic.

His wife says the decision is a matter of life and death for Assange, whose health has deteriorated during his time in custody.

"His life is at risk every single day he stays in prison," Stella Assange said Thursday. "If he's extradited, he will die."

Julian Assange has been indicted in the US on 18 charges over Wikileaks' publication of hundreds of thousands of classified documents in 2010
PHOTO: EPA

The charges

Assange, 52, an Australian computer expert, has been indicted in the US on 18 charges over Wikileaks' publication of hundreds of thousands of classified documents in 2010.

Prosecutors say he conspired with US army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to hack into a Pentagon computer and release secret diplomatic cables and military files on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.He faces 17 counts of espionage and one charge of computer misuse. Assange and his supporters argue he acted as a journalist to expose US military wrongdoing and is protected under press freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

Among the files published by WikiLeaks was video of a 2007 Apache helicopter attack by American forces in Baghdad that killed 11 people, including two Reuters journalists.

US lawyers say Assange is guilty of trying to hack the Pentagon computer and that WikiLeaks' publications created a "grave and imminent risk" to US intelligence sources in Afghanistan and Iraq.While the US criminal case against Assange was only unsealed in 2019, his freedom has been restricted for more than a dozen years.

Assange took refuge in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London in 2012 and was granted political asylum after courts in England ruled he should be extradited to Sweden as part of a rape investigation in the Scandinavian country.

He was arrested by British police after Ecuador's government withdrew his asylum status in 2019 and then jailed for skipping bail when he first took shelter inside the embassy.

A judge in London initially blocked Assange's transfer to the US on the grounds he was likely to kill himself if held in harsh American prison conditions.But subsequent courts cleared the way for the move after US authorities provided assurances he wouldn't experience the severe treatment that his lawyers said would put his physical and mental health at risk.Stella Assange and her husband's supporters have criticised those assurances as being meaningless because they are conditional.

If the London court rejects Assange's plea for a full appeal, he could be extradited to the US once British officials approve his removal.His legal team plans to appeal an adverse ruling to the European Court of Human Rights, but they fear he could possibly be transferred before the court in Strasbourg, France, could halt his removal.

If he prevails at this week's hearing, it would set the stage for an appeal process that is likely to further drag out the case."This procedure has been marked by prolonged and creeping time frames," Wikileaks Editor-in-Chief Kristinn Hrafnsson said. "We call it punishment through process. It is obviously a deliberate attempt to wear him down to punish him by taking this long."While the UK Supreme Court rejected Assange's petition, saying he didn't raise an "arguable point of law", his wife said his new bid will raise several points that are grounds for appeal.Lawyers for Assange plan to argue he can't get a fair trial in the US, that a US-UK treaty prohibits extradition for political offences and that the crime of espionage was not meant to apply to publishers.

Stella Assange said her husband's mental and physical health has declined dramatically and he's aged prematurely in prison. He experienced a mini-stroke in October 2021 and was so ill in December that he broke a rib coughing.The boys visit their father in prison every week, undergoing security checks that include being patted down by guards and sniffed by dogs, Stella Assange said. The couple is protective of the children, who haven't been told why their father is behind bars, according to their mother.

"They know exactly what a prison is. They know that the guards are stopping Julian from leaving the prison even though he wants to come home."

—PTI

SALAR

EU to regulate AI models based on their potential risk

European Union countries are poised to adopt the world's first comprehensive set of laws to regulate artificial intelligence (AI). EU AI Act puts its toughest rules on the riskiest AI models, and is designed to ensure that AI systems are safe and respect fundamental rights and EU values.

"The act is enormously consequential, in terms of shaping how we think about AI regulation and setting a precedent," says Rishi Bommasani, who researches the societal impact of AI at Stanford University in California.

The legislation comes as AI develops apace. This year is expected to see the launch of new versions of generative AI models — such as GPT, which powers ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI in San Francisco, California — and existing systems are being used in scams and to propagate misinformation. China already uses a patchwork of laws to guide commercial use of AI, and US regulation is under way. Last October, President Joe Biden signed the nation's first AI executive order, requiring federal agencies to take action to manage the risks of AI.

EU nations' governments approved the legislation on 2 February, and the law now needs final sign-off from the European Parliament, one of the EU's three legislative branches; this is expected to happen in April. If the text remains unchanged, as policy watchers expect, the law will enter into force in 2026.

Some researchers have welcomed the act for its potential to encourage open science, whereas others worry that it could stifle innovation. Nature examines how the law will affect research.

EU has chosen to regulate AI models on the basis of their potential risk, by applying stricter rules to riskier applications and outlining separate regulations for general-purpose AI models, such as GPT, which have broad and unpredictable uses.

The law bans AI systems that carry 'unacceptable risk', for example those that use biometric data to infer sensitive characteristics, such as people's sexual orientation. High-risk applications, such as using AI in hiring and law enforcement, must fulfil certain obligations; for example, developers must show that their models are safe, transparent and explainable to users, and that they adhere to privacy regulations anddo not discriminate. For lower-risk AI tools, developers will still have to tell users when they are interacting with AI-generated content. The law applies to models operating in the EU and any firm that violates the rules risks a fine of up to 7 per cent of its annual global profits.

In theory, very little. Last year, the European Parliament added a clause to the draft act that would exempt AI models developed purely for research, development or prototyping. The EU has worked hard to make sure that the act doesn't affect research negatively, says Joanna Bryson, who studies AI and its regulation at the Hertie School in Berlin. "They really don't want to cut off innovation, so I'd be astounded if this is going to be a problem."But the act is still likely to have an effect, by making researchers think about transparency, how they report on their models and potential biases, says Hovy. "I think it will filter down and foster good practice," he says.

After heated debate, policymakers chose to regulate powerful general-purpose models — such as the generative models that create images, code and video — in their own two-tier category.The first tier covers all general-purpose models, except those used only in research or published under an open-source licence. These will be subject to transparency requirements, including detailing their training methodologies and energy consumption, and must show they respect copyright laws .

The second, much stricter, tier will cover general-purpose models deemed to have "high-impact capabilities", which pose a higher "systemic risk". These models will be subject to "some pretty significant obligations", says Bommasani, including stringent safety testing and cybersecurity checks. Developers will be made to release details of their architecture and data sources.

Some scientists are against regulating AI models, preferring to focus on how they're used. "Smarter and more capable does not mean more harm," says Jenia Jitsev, an AI researcher at the Jülich Supercomputing Centre in Germany and another co-founder of LAION. Basing regulation on any measure of capability has no scientific basis, adds Jitsev. They use the analogy of defining as dangerous all chemistry that uses a certain number of person-hours. "It's as unproductive as this."

The European Commission will create an AI Office to oversee general-purpose models, advised by independent experts. The office will develop ways to evaluate the capabilities of these models and monitor related risks. But even if companies such as OpenAI comply with regulations and submit, for example, their enormous data sets, Jitsev questions whether a public body will have the resources to scrutinize submissions adequately. "The demand to be transparent is very important," they say. "But there was little thought spent on how these procedures have to be executed."

Courtesy, Nature

EU AI Act puts its toughest rules on the riskiest AI models, and is designed to ensure that AI systems are safe and respect fundamental rights and EU values
PHOTO: FREEPIK

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

The other Russian dissidents besides 'slain' Navalny

The sudden death of Russian President Vladimir Putin's most formidable antagonist has left an open wound in Russia's political opposition.

Alexei Navalny, 47, was the Kremlin's best-known critic at home and abroad. Before he died in a penal colony Friday, the anti-corruption crusader, protest organiser and politician with an arch sense of humour became the subject of an award-winning documentary. His channels on YouTube had millions of subscribers.

Navalny also was the first opposition leader in Russia to receive a lengthy prison sentence in recent years. There would be others, heralding a crackdown on dissent that became more punishing with the invasion of Ukraine. In the three years since Navalny lost his freedom, multiple prominent dissidents were imprisoned, while others fled Russia under pressure.

Many of them nevertheless persisted in challenging Putin — organising abroad, pushing for sanctions on Russia, supporting like-minded Russians in exile or continuing to speak out from behind bars.

These are some of the key remaining figures:

Navalny's Core team

Colleagues at the Anti-Corruption Foundation, which Navalny founded in 2011 to expose political corruption, and his other close associates often had to work without him. Even before he was imprisoned in January 2021, Navalny was subject to regular arrests and long jail stints.

In 2020, he was poisoned with a nerve agent, spent 18 days in a coma and recuperated in Germany for weeks. His prison term included more than 300 days in isolation, with communication possible but difficult from a punishment cell.

His closest associates — top strategist Leonid Volkov, head of investigations Maria Pevchikh, foundation director Ivan Zhdanov and spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh — also faced unrelenting pressure and prosecution in Russia. In recent years, all left the country and worked from abroad, providing political commentary and the foundation's signature YouTube exposes of political corruption.They kept pushing for Navalny's release from prison, organised protests and mounted a campaign to undermine Putin's image in Russia ahead of a presidential election he is almost certain to win next month.

"Alexei was awesome," Volkov wrote Sunday on X, formerly Twitter. "He was a natural politician, very talented, very efficient. And from himself and from everyone around him, he demanded one thing: not to throw in the towel, not to give up, not to despair. ... This is what he wants from us now. His life's work must prevail."

The Russian Opposition leaders are, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, IlyYashin
PHOTO: X/ VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA/ MIKHAIL KHODORKOVSKY/ ILYY ASHIN

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, 60, is a former tycoon turned Russian opposition figure in exile. Khodorkovsky spent a decade in prison in Russia on charges widely seen as political revenge for challenging Putin's rule in the early 2000s. He was released in 2013, shortly before Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. A surprise pardon from Putin on the eve of the Olympics was widely seen as an effort by the Kremlin to improve Russia's image in the West.Khodorkovsky was flown to Germany and later settled in London. From exile, he launched Open Russia, an opposition group that ran its own news outlet, supported candidates in various elections, provided legal aid to defendants facing politically motivated prosecutions and had an educational platform.

Open Russia and its activists the country faced constant pressure from the authorities; some were prosecuted in Russia, and one of its leaders, Andrei Pivovarov, is currently serving a four-year prison term.

The group eventually shut down, but Khodorkovsky continued his vocal criticism of the Kremlin. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine two years ago this week, he and other prominent Putin critics, including chess legend Garry Kasparov and former lawmaker Dmitry Gudkov, formed the Antiwar Committee, a broad opposition alliance that opposes the invasion and seeks to undermine Putin.

Vladimir Kara-Murza

Once a journalist and now a prominent opposition politician, Vladimir Kara-Murza, 42, received the longest single sentence handed to a Kremlin critic in Putin's Russia — 25 years on charges of treason. He is serving the sentence in a Siberian penal colony and has been repeatedly placed in solitary confinement.

Kara-Murza was an associate of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, another fierce Putin critic who was assassinated near the Kremlin in 2015. A few years before that, Kara-Murza and Nemtsov lobbied for passage of the Magnitsky Act in the US. The law was a response to the prison death of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who had exposed a tax fraud scheme. It authorised Washington to impose sanctions on Russians deemed to be human rights violators.

Kara-Murza survived what he believes were attempts to poison him in 2015 and 2017 but kept returning to Russia despite concerns that it might be unsafe for him to do so. Since his April 2022 arrest, he has continued to speak out against Putin and the war in Ukraine in multiple opinion columns and letters written from behind bars. His wife, Yevgenia, has also actively campaigned to secure freedom for him and other jailed Kremlin critics.

Ilya Yashin

Ilya Yashin, 40, refused to leave Russia despite the unprecedented pressure authorities applied to stifle dissent. He said that getting out of the country would undermine his value as a politician.Yashin, an uncompromising member of a Moscow municipal council, was a vocal ally of Navalny's. He eventually was arrested in June 2022 and later sentenced to 8 1/2 years in prison for "spreading false information" about the Russian military, a criminal offence since March 2022.

The harsh sentence didn't silence his sharp criticism of the Kremlin. Yashin's associates regularly update his social media pages with messages he relays from prison. In a prison interview with The Associated Press in September 2022, Yashin urged ordinary Russians to help spread the word, too."Demand for an alternative point of view has appeared in society," Yashin told the AP in written answers from behind bars.

—PTI

US can't be the last nation to ban TikTok: Nikki Haley

WASHINGTON, 19 FEB

Describing Chinese-owned app TikTok as dangerous, Republican presidential aspirant Nikki Haley has said that when countries like India and Nepal have banned this social media platform, the US cannot be the last nation to do the same. What everybody needs to know is China is controlling all of that, Haley, the Indian-American former US Ambassador to the UN, said during a Fox News town hall. "If you want to know how it affects you, just imagine by having that app on your phone, China can now see your finances, they can now see who your contacts are. They can see what you click on, why you click on it and how it affects you. They can impact what you see. And they can impact what you hear. That is the dangerous part of TikTok," Haley, 52, said on Sunday. "And India has banned it. You had Nepal just banned it because it was causing social disruption. America can't be the last country to ban TikTok. Let's end it now and stop it so it doesn't hurt our children any further," Haley said in response to a question. *—PTI*

Indian-origin teen's murder: UK cops rapped for misconduct

LONDON, 19 FEB

An unnamed British policeman underwent a misconduct hearing after it emerged that he had shared details of injuries via WhatsApp following a stabbing attack on an Indian-origin teenager and her friend in Nottingham last year. According to a report in 'The Sun' newspaper on Monday, a misconduct hearing last month heard how the officer posted details about students Grace O'Malley-Kumar and Barnaby Webber as well as school caretaker Ian Coates soon after they were killed during a knife attack spree by Valdo Calocane in the central England city in June 2023. A second officer, Police Constable (PC) Matthew Gell, is said to have passed on the "distasteful" message to his wife and a friend. "What an abhorrent way to conduct an investigation. To learn there has been internal needless voyeurism on our loved ones is unforgivable," Barnaby's mother Emma Webber told the newspaper. *—PTI*

South Korea doctors offer to resign amid spat with govt

SEOUL, 19 FEB

Trainee doctors in South Korea began resigning en masse Monday in protest of a government medical policy, causing reported delays in surgeries and other treatments at hospitals, though no major disruption in the country's medical service has yet occurred. Doctors' groups and the government have been squabbling over a government plan to increase the number of medical school admissions by 2,000, starting from next year. Health authorities say it's urgent to have more doctors considering South Korea's fast-aging population. They say the number of doctors in the country relative to the size of the population is among the lowest in the developed world. *—PTI*

Taiwan rejects China's criticism over boat chase

TAIPEI, 19 FEB

Taiwan has reaffirmed its commitment to upholding maritime law within its dominion, rejecting Beijing's ongoing criticism of the Taiwanese Coast Guard's handling of an incident near Kinmen that resulted in the deaths of two Chinese fishermen, as reported by Focus Taiwan. The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), Taiwan's principal agency overseeing cross-Taiwan Strait affairs, asserted in a statement on 18 February that the government will continue "to enforce the law" in waters it controls based on the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area. According to the MAC, Taiwanese authorities are authorized to take defensive measures if a Chinese vessel breaches "restricted" or "prohibited" waters under Taiwan's control, as per Focus Taiwan. *—ANI*

Navalny's body found with 'signs of bruises'

Navalny's wife vows to continue his work for a 'free Russia'

MOSCOW, 19 FEB

Navalny's spokesperson Kira Yarmysh said that the country's top criminal investigation agency, informed Lyudmila Navalnaya that the cause of her son's death remained unknown ***PHOTO: EPA***

The mother of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny on Monday was denied access to a morgue where his body was believed to be kept after his death in an Arctic penal colony, and Navalny's allies accused authorities of trying to hide evidence. The body had "signs of bruises", an anonymous paramedic told an independent news outlet.

Navalny's spokesperson Kira Yarmysh said that the Investigative Committee, the country's top criminal investigation agency, informed Lyudmila Navalnaya that the cause of her son's death remained unknown and that the official probe had been extended. "They lie, buy time for themselves and do not even hide it," Yarmysh posted on X, formerly Twitter.

Many world leaders blamed President Vladimir Putin and his government for Navalny's death Friday at age 47.

vcv0Navalny's team said he was "murdered", and charged that officials' refusal to hand over his body was part of a cover-up. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov slammed what he described as "boorish" and "inadmissible" statements by Western leaders who held Putin responsible for Navalny's death. "Those statements can't do any harm to the head of our state, but they certainly aren't becoming for those who make them," Peskov said in a call with reporters. Yarmysh said that Navalny's 69-year-old mother and his lawyers were not allowed into the morgue in Salekhard on Monday morning. The staff didn't answer when they asked if the body was there, Yarmysh said.

Asked when Navalny's body could be handed over to his family, Peskov responded that the Kremlin was not involved in those proceedings, adding that the official probe was continuing in line with the law. Navalny's ally Ivan Zhdanov denounced the Russian authorities as "lackeys and liars". "It's clear what they are doing now — covering up the traces of their crime," he wrote Monday.

Navalny's death has deprived the Russian opposition of its most well-known and inspiring politician less than a month before an election that is all but certain to give Putin another six years in power. *—AP*

Houthi' attack damages Belize-flagged ship

DUBAI, 19 FEB

The Iran-backed Houthis also claimed they shot down an American MQ-9 Reaper drone ***PHOTO: PTI***

A missile attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels that damaged a Belize-flagged ship travelling through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden has forced the crew to abandon the ship, authorities said Monday.

The Iran-backed Houthis also claimed they shot down an American MQ-9 Reaper drone, something not immediately acknowledged by US forces in the region. However, the Houthis have downed US drones before. Meanwhile, the US military said it was conducting new airstrikes targeting the rebels, including one that targeted the first Houthi underwater drone seen since they began launching attacks on international shipping in November.

The ship targeted in the Houthi attack on Sunday reported sustaining damage after "an explosion in close proximity to the vessel," the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations centre reported.

"Military authorities report crew have abandoned the vessel," the UKMTO said. "Vessel at anchor and all crew are safe." Houthi Brig Gen Yahya Saree issued a statement claiming the attack, saying the vessel was "now at risk of potentially sinking".

"The ship suffered catastrophic damages and came to a complete halt," Saree said. "During the operation, we made sure that the ship's crew exited safely." The private security firm Ambrey reported the British-registered, Lebanese-operated cargo ship had been on its way to Bulgaria after leaving Khorfakkan in the United Arab Emirates. *—AP*

'Rejected power-sharing formula offered by PML-N'

KARACHI, 19 FEB

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari ***PHOTO: PTI***

Pakistan Peoples Party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has revealed that he said "No" to a power-sharing formula in which the prime minister's post would be shared between his and former premier Nawaz Sharif's parties, as he did not want to take up the top post without the people's mandate.

The 35-year-old former foreign minister was the prime ministerial face of PPP. However, in the 8 February elections, his party came third with 54 seats in the National Assembly, behind more than 90 seats won by independents backed by jailed prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N).

To form a government, a party must win 133 seats out of 265 contested seats in the 266-member National Assembly. PPP and PML-N, who have formed a post-poll alliance, have failed to reach a consensus on a power-sharing formula despite several meetings between their top leadership. *—PTI*

Pak summons absentee pleader in poll plea

ISLAMABAD, 19 FEB

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Monday strongly rapped and summoned a retired Army officer after he failed to appear before it during the hearing of his plea seeking the elections to be declared null and void due to alleged rigging.

The 8 February elections have been controversial with several serious allegations of widespread rigging to alter the results. Over 10 days after the voting, there was still no clarity on which party would form the government. Though PTI, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party have announced that they will form a coalition government. *—PTI*

Afghan troops blocked from relocating to UK

Documents show forces rejected applications despite some containing compelling evidence of service alongside British army ***PHOTO: PTI***

LONDON, 19 FEB

UK Special Forces blocked Afghan troops they had fought alongside from relocating to the UK after the Taliban seized power, BBC Panorama can reveal.

Leaked documents show Special Forces rejected applications despite some containing compelling evidence of service alongside the British military. Afghan commandos accompanied forces on some of the most dangerous missions of the conflict. The Ministry said it was conducting an independent review. When the Taliban swept to power in August 2021, members of Afghan Special Forces units CF 333 and ATF 444 - known as the "Triples" - were among the groups most at risk of reprisal, having supported UK Special Forces in their fight against the Taliban.

They were eligible to apply for resettlement to the UK under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy scheme, but hundreds had their applications rejected. Dozens have reportedly been beaten, tortured, or killed by the Taliban since.

The Armed Forces Minister, James Heappey, has now announced a review of about 2,000 applications after admitting that the decision-making process behind some rejections was "not robust". *—BBC News*

TRIBAL VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA KILLS 26

MELBOURNE, 19 FEB

At least 26 combatants and an unconfirmed number of bystanders were killed in a gunbattle between warring tribes in Papua New Guinea, police said Monday.

A tribe, their allies and mercenaries were on their way to attack a neighboring tribe when they were ambushed Sunday in Enga province in the South Pacific nation's remote highlands, Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Acting Superintendent George Kakas said.

Police Commissioner David Manning later described the clash as a "gunbattle between warring tribes". An unconfirmed number of villagers also were killed. Police reinforcements were sent to the scene of the battle, Manning said. "At this point, it's not clear exactly how far we have moved into the conflict there," Manning told Australian Broadcasting Corp. "But the intent is to regain control or have a significant presence in that conflict area and then work...our way through our procedures in dealing with this type of incident."

Kakas initially said 53 combatants had died. But security forces later revised the death toll down to 26. Bodies were collected from the battlefield, roads and the riverside, then loaded onto police trucks and taken to the hospital. Authorities were still counting "those who were shot, injured and ran off into the bushes," Kakas said. *—AP*

Ashwin Ramaswami, first Gen Z running for Georgia Senate

WASHINGTON, 19 FEB

Ashwin Ramaswami has become the first Indian-American from Gen Z to run for a state or federal legislature in the US, indicative of a new breed of young politicians emerging from the community.

Ramaswami ***PHOTO: PTI***

Ramaswami's parents immigrated to the US from Tamil Nadu in 1990. Generation Z (also known as Zoomers) encompasses those born between 1997 and 2012. "I'm running for (Georgia) State Senate in order to give back to my community. I want to make sure that everyone has the same opportunities that I had growing up," Ramaswami, 24, told PTI.

"I want to make sure we have a new voice, people who are young, who come from unconventional backgrounds in politics because it's really important that we have people who represent us, not just people who can afford to do it," he said. A second-generation Indian-American who has built a career in software engineering, election security, and technology law and policy research, is running in the Democratic party for State Senate in District 48 of Georgia. Ramaswami is a Democrat and he is hoping to replace incumbent Republican Shawn Still, who was indicted with former President Donald Trump for the 6 January insurrection at the US Capitol. *—PTI*

BAFTA FILM AWARDS

OPPENHEIMER DOMINATES WITH SEVEN TROPHIES

NEW YORK, 19 FEB

Christopher Nolan with wife and producer Emma Thomas ***PHOTO: EPA***

Cillian Murphy, Robert Downey Jr and director Christopher Nolan were all honoured for their work on Oppenheimer as the film dominated the Bafta Awards.

Murphy was named best actor for playing J Robert Oppenheimer, known as the father of the atomic bomb, while Downey Jr won best supporting actor. The drama won seven Baftas including best film. Poor Things picked up five, including best actress for Emma Stone.

Best supporting actress went to Da'Vine Joy Randolph for The Holdovers. Oppenheimer and the acting winners could well repeat their successes at the Oscars in three weeks - although Oscar and Bafta voters rarely totally agree.

In a surprise appearance, Michael J Fox announced Oppenheimer as the winner of best film, the top prize at Sunday's ceremony. The 62-year-old, who has had Parkinson's disease for more than 30 years, received a standing ovation from the audience.

Murphy told the ceremony after winning the first Bafta of his career: "Oh boy. Holy moly. Thank you very, very much Bafta." The Irish actor paid tribute to his "Oppenhomies" and praised Nolan, adding: "Thank you for always pushing me and demanding excellence because that is what you deliver time and time again."

It was the British director's first Bafta win, too. *—BBC News*

Padukone stuns in saree

LONDON, 19 FEB

Actor Deepika Padukone, who presented an award at the 77th British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA), ditched the usual award season gown look for a glittering saree.

The actor presented filmmaker Jonathan Glazer with the Bafta for the 'Film Not in English' language category at a ceremony here on Sunday.

"The incredible stories nominated in this category depict the real and imagined world that stay with us long after the credits roll. From the Alps to the Andes, South Poland to Seoul and to Ukraine..." the 38-year-old actor said before announcing Glazer's The Zone of Interest as the winner. For the event, Deepika donned a couture saree and custon jewellery by Sabyasachi Mukherjee. The actor, who was last seen in Hindi film Fighter, introduced a performance of Naatu Naatu at the Oscars last year. *—PTI*

Winners

- Best film: Oppenheimer
- Leading actress: Emma Stone (Poor Things)
- Leading actor: Cillian Murphy (Oppenheimer)
- Supporting actress: Da'Vine Joy Randolph (The Holdovers)
- Supporting actor: Robert Downey Jr (Oppenheimer)
- Director: Christopher Nolan (Oppenheimer)
- Animated film: The Boy and the Heron
- Documentary: 20 Days In Mariupol
- Original score: Oppenheimer
- Cinematography: Oppenheimer
- Original screenplay: Anatomy of a Fall
- Bafta Fellowship: Samantha Morton

Gold climbs ₹250; silver tumbles ₹500

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Gold prices climbed Rs 250 to Rs 62,800 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday amid a rise in the precious metal's prices in the global markets, according to HDFC Securities.In the previous close, the yellow metal had ended at Rs 62,550 per 10 grams. However, silver tumbled Rs 500 to Rs 76,000 per kilogram."Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 62,800 per 10 grams, up Rs 250, taking a positive trend from overseas markets," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,020 per ounce, up USD 7 from the previous close.However, silver was quoting lower at USD 23.09 per ounce, while it had closed at USD 23.39 per ounce in the previous trade. Gold traded higher in the European trading session on Monday, helped by safe haven demand, Gandhi added.*—PTI*

Finolex to more than double optic fibre cable capacity

MUMBAI, 19 FEB

Finolex Cables on Monday signed an agreement with the Maharashtra industries department to invest Rs 580 crore to more than double its optic fibre cables capacity to 10 million fibre km per year as 5G rollout is leading to higher demand for last mile connectivity.Finolex Cables has an existing capacity of 4 million fibre km per year which will touch 10 million fibre km per year after the commissioning of the new plant. The new plant will be solely catering to fibre optic cables, the company said in a statement.The statement did not specify where project will come up or when the work will begin and be completed.draw towers and the implementation of backward integration. *—PTI*

GPT Healthcare IPO to open on 22 Feb

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

GPT Healthcare Ltd, which operates and manages mid-sized multi-specialty hospitals under the ILS Hospitals brand, on Monday fixed a price band at Rs 177-186 per share for its Rs 502-crore initial public offering (IPO). The initial share-sale will open for a public subscription during February 22-26. The bidding for anchor investors will open for a day on 21 February, the company said.The IPO is a combination of a fresh issue of equity shares aggregating to Rs 40 crore and an Offer For Sale (OFS) of up to 2.6 crore equity shares by private equity firm BanyanTree Growth Capital II. BanyanTree, which holds 2.6 crore shares or 32.64 per cent stake in Kolkata-based GPT Healthcare, is divesting its entire shareholding in the company.Proceeds from the fresh issue to the tune of Rs 30 crore will be used for payment of debt and general corporate purposes.At the upper end of the price, the IPO will mobilise Rs 501.67 crore.GPT Healthcare, founded by Dwarika Prasad Tantia, Dr Om Tantia and Shree Gopal Tantia, started with an eight-bed hospital in Kolkata in 2000.*—PTI*

Sacked Twitter staff in Ghana get salary after 15 months

ACCRA, 19 FEB

X, has finally paid off the staff it sacked in its African headquarters more than a year after they were laid off, the agency which represents them has said.Most had only been in the job, based in Ghana's capital, Accra, for a few months when the social media platform fired them in November 2022.They threatened to take X to court for failing to pay the money they said they were promised.TX has not commented.X has previously said that it had paid ex-employees in full.Elon Musk, who took over the company in 2022, embarked on a global cull of employees, sacking more than 6,000 people. *—BBC News*

Nifty hits record high, Sensex up

Investors become richer by ₹2.20L cr

MUMBAI, 19 FEB

Bajaj Finserve, ICICI Bank, Bajaj Finance, Sun Pharma, Maruti Suzuki, ITC, and Nestle were the lead gainers ***PHOTO: PTI***

Stock markets closed higher for the fifth consecutive day on Monday with the benchmark Sensex rising 281 points and Nifty scaling its fresh lifetime high driven by gains in financial and FMCG shares.

The 30-share BSE Sensex rose by 281.52 points or 0.39 per cent to close at 72,708.16. As many as 17 Sensex shares advanced while 13 closed in the red. After a firm start, the index hit a high of 72,881.93 in day trade.

The broader Nifty closed at its all-time high of 22,122.25 points, up by 81.55 points or 0.37 per cent from the last close.

The market capitalisation (mcap) of BSE-listed companies went up Rs 2,19,581.56 crore to reach its all-time high of Rs 3,91,69,087.01 crore.

The 50-issue barometer also scaled its intra-day record high of 22,186.65 helped by gains in pharma, banking and oil shares. As many as 27 Nifty shares posted gains while 23 declined.Key stock indices closed in the green for the fifth straight day on Monday, gaining around 2.3 per cent.

Overall market capitalisation of BSE listed shares surged to Rs 391.69 lakh crore or USD 4.72 trillion, making investors richer by Rs 2.20 lakh crore.

Among Sensex shares, Bajaj Finserve, ICICI Bank, Bharti Airtel, Bajaj Finance, Sun Pharma, Maruti Suzuki, ITC, and Nestle were the lead gainers. On the other hand, L&T Wipro, IndusInd Bank and TCS and Tata Motors were the lead losers.

Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said, "Despite an unattractive risk reward, the broader market continued its outperformance in expectation of improvements in private capex and optimism about political stability. *—PTI*

BYJU'S rights issue gets $300 million commitment

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

BYJU'S investors have no voting rights on the CEO or management change as per the shareholder's agreement ***PHOTO: X***

Edtech major Think and Learn, which operates under BYJU'S brand name, is learnt to have received a commitment of USD 300 million from investors for its ongoing rights issue which will close by the end of February, sources aware of the development said.

BYJU'S floated a rights issue in January to raise USD 200 million at an enterprise valuation in the range of USD 220-250 million which is a 99 per cent reduction in its peak valuation of USD 22 billion.

Sources also shared that BYJU'S has offered miffed investors to appoint two independent directors to enhance transparency but only after the rights issue and declaring its financial results for the 2023 fiscal.

"BYJU'S is in discussion with miffed investors also. The company expects that they will also invest, otherwise their shareholding will reduce by almost 50 per cent," the source said.

Another source said that BYJU'S has offered to appoint two independent directors on the board to enhance transparency but the appointment can happen only after results for financial year 2023 are declared.

"BYJU'S expects to close the FY 2023 financial result in this quarter which will make the company completely compliant with the rules. Thereafter, the company will look to appoint two independent directors to its board. The proposal is part of ongoing discussion with miffed investors who have called for EGM (Extraordinary General Meeting) on February 23," the source said.

According to a source, the EGM notice has been backed by General Atlantic, Peak XV, Sofina, Chan Zuckerberg, Owl, and Sands, who jointly account for around 30 per cent stake in BYJU'S.

BYJU'S investors have no voting rights on the CEO or management change as per the shareholder's agreement. *—PTI*

Power Grid okays investments of ₹656cr

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

State-owned Power Grid Corporation on Monday said its board has approved an investment worth about Rs 656 crore for implementation of electricity transmission projects in the country."...its Board of Directors and 'Committee of Directors on Investment on Projects in their respective meetings held on 18 February, 2024, have accorded investment approvals," a BSE filing stated.Board approved implementation of Unified Load Dispatch and Communication (ULDC) Phase-III (SCADA/EMS Upgradation Project Northern Region SLDCs at an estimated cost of Rs 514.66 crore with commissioning schedule of 15 November, 2025. It approved augmentation of 765/400 kV, 1500 MVA transformer (4th) at Bhiwani at cost of Rs 141.09 crore, scheduled to be commissioned by 5 May, 2025. *—PTI*

Paytm shares jump 5%; hit upper circuit

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Shares of One97 communications -- owner of the brand Paytm -- jumped 5 per cent in the morning trade on Monday after the crisis-hit fintech company's decision to collaborate with Axis Bank for the continuation of merchant settlements.

Extending its gains in the second consecutive session, the stock of the company climbed 5 per cent each to Rs 358.55 and Rs 358.35 apiece -- also its upper circuit limit -- on the BSE and NSE, respectively.

In the morning trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex benchmark gained 185.81 points or 0.26 per cent to 72,612.45, while NSE Nifty rose 0.32 per cent to 22,110.60 points.

In a regulatory filing on Friday, One97 Communications said it has shifted its nodal account to Axis Bank from its arm Paytm Payments Bank.

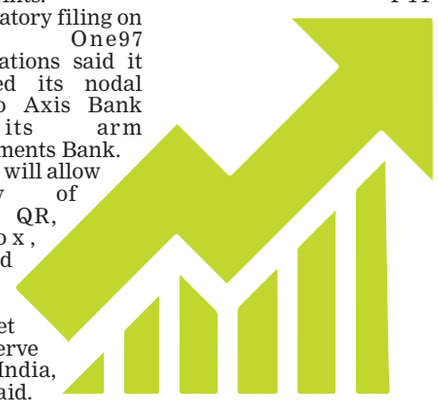
The move will allow continuity of Paytm QR, soundbox, card machine after the March 15 set by the Reserve Bank of India, the filing said.

The RBI has advised customers and merchants of Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) to shift their accounts to other banks by 15 March, giving 15 more days to the beleaguered entity to close most of its operations, including deposit and credit transactions, it added.

On Friday, shares of Paytm rose 5 per cent, rebounding after three days of fall amid the company coming under the regulatory scanner for various violations related to its payments bank business.

Paytm shares have been witnessing intense selling pressure this month after the RBI action.

—PTI



TO 22.36 MILLION TONNES

ISMA has projected sugar output to decline by 10 per cent to 33.05 million tonnes in the current 2023-24 ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

Sugar output falls 2.48% till 15 Feb

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

The country's sugar production dipped 2.48 per cent to 22.36 million tonnes till 15 February of the ongoing 2023-24 marketing year, as per the industry body ISMA's latest data.

Sugar production stood at 22.93 million tonnes in the year-ago period. Sugar marketing year runs from October to September.

In its second estimate, the Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA) has projected sugar output to decline by 10 per cent to 33.05 million tonnes in the current 2023-24 marketing year as against 36.62 million tonnes in the previous year.

According to ISMA, sugar production in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu remained lower till February 15 of the ongoing marketing year.

However, sugar output in Uttar Pradesh -- the country's second largest producer of the sweetener -- was higher at 6.77 million tonnes as against 6.12 million tonnes in the period under review.The production in Maharasthra -- the country's largest producing state of sugar -- was down at 7.94 million tonnes till February of this marketing year, compared with 8.59 million tonnes in the year-ago period.

Similarly, production in Karnataka -- the country's third largest producer -- was down at 4.32 million tonnes from 4.6 million tonnes in the said period. *—PTI*

1.17% drop in tea exports to 207.14 mkgs

KOLKATA, 19 FEB

- Export scenario for the full calendar year 2023 remains grim as shipments to the West Asian country remain uncertain

Tea exports from India have declined by 1.17 per cent to 207.14 million kgs in the January-November period of 2023, according to official data.The country shipped out 209.60 mkgs of tea during a similar 11-month period of the previous year.During the calendar year 2022, the total tea exports were 231.08 mkgs.Region-wise, exports from North India, comprising primarily the states of Assam and West Bengal, stood at 125.27 mkgs, down from 132.21 mkgs in the comparable periods of 2023 and 2022 respectively, the Tea Board data said.

Shipments from South India during the first 11 months of 2023 increased to 81.87 mkgs from 77.39 mkgs in the previous similar period, according to the data.Industry sources said that the dip in exports was due to the volume loss in the Iran market due to payment problems.The Iranian market constitutes 20 per cent of India's total tea exports after the Commonwealth of Independent States bloc.

The sources also said the export scenario for the full calendar year 2023 remains grim as shipments to the West Asian country remain uncertain.

The estimated production in December 2023 stood at 77.52 million kgs, higher from 64.53 million kgs in the same month of the previous year. *—PTI*

Pure EV raises $8 M in latest funding

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Electric two-wheeler firm Pure EV on Monday said it has raised USD 8 million (around Rs 66 crore) from a consortium of investors.

The funding was led by Bennett Coleman and Company Ltd, Hindustan Times Media Ventures, alongside Ushodaya Enterprises Pvt Ltd, existing investors and high net-worth individuals, Pure EV said in a statement.

The Hyderabad-based company said it is currently in the final stage of concluding its Series A1 funding round, amounting to USD 25 million with the participation of a foreign institutional investor.

Concurrently, ongoing discussions are taking place with potential investors from Dubai, Hong Kong, and Singapore for Series A2 funding, targeting an infusion of USD 15 million, it added.

—PTI

No cut in import duty on rubber: Official

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

- The government also reduced the period of utilization of imported dry rubber under the advance licensing scheme from 18 months to 6 months from January 2015

The government is not considering any cut in import duty on rubber as of now as the differential between the local and international prices is maintained, a senior official said on Monday

"We have a differential already maintained for the imports that we are getting vis-a-vis the local production," Additional Secretary in the Commerce Ministry Amardeep Singh said.

Over 13 lakh rubber growers are there in the country. Kerala accounts for a major chunk of the production, which was 8.39 lakh tonnes in 2022-23. Consumption during that fiscal was 13.5 lakh tonnes.

The gap is bridged by imports from countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian nations.

To regulate the import of natural rubber, the government increased the duty on the import of dry rubber to 25 per cent or Rs 30 per kg, whichever is lower from 30 April 2015.

The government also reduced the period of utilization of imported dry rubber under the advance licensing scheme from 18 months to 6 months from January 2015.

Port entry for import of natural rubber has been restricted to ports at Chennai and Nhava Sheva (Jawaharlal Nehru Port) since January 2016. ..

Further, in the Union Budget 2023-24, the rate of custom duty on compound rubber was also increased from 10 per cent to 25 per cent or Rs 30 per kg, whichever is lower (at par with natural rubber) to curb circumvention on duty. *—PTI*

I-T sets ₹1L threshold per person for withdrawal of tax

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

The limit of Rs 1 lakh would include principal component of tax demand, interest, penalty or fee, cess, surcharge ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

The Income Tax department has prescribed a ceiling of Rs 1 lakh per assessee for withdrawal of small tax demands till Assessment Year 2015-16, in accordance with a scheme announced in Budget.

The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has issued an order giving effect to the 2024-25 Budget announcement by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.The Budget had announced that tax demands for AY 2010-11 of up to Rs 25,000 and for AY 2011-12 to 2015-16 of up to Rs 10,000 will be withdrawn. Tax demands totalling about Rs 3,500 crore will be withdrawn following the announcement.

The CBDT order said that such outstanding tax demands pertaining to income tax, wealth tax and gift tax as on 31 January, 2024, shall be remitted and extinguished "subject to the maximum ceiling of Rs 1 lakh for any specific taxpayer/assessee".

The limit of Rs 1 lakh would include principal component of tax demand, interest, penalty or fee, cess, surcharge.However, the remission shall not be applicable on the demands raised against the tax deductors or tax collectors under TDS or TCS provisions of the I-T Act.

Nangia Andersen India Partner Maneesh Bawa said the directive further specifies that this waiver or cancellation does not entitle taxpayers to any claims for credit or refunds.

Additionally, the waiver or cancellation will not influence any ongoing, planned, or potential criminal legal proceedings against the taxpayer and does not grant any immunity under any legislation.

"Taxpayers are advised to access their online accounts and navigate to Pending Action > Response to Outstanding Demand to verify the status of 'Extinguished Demands' related to them," Bawa said. *—PTI*

CRACKDOWN ON DEEPFAKES

MCA, Meta to curb AI misinformation with WhatsApp helpline

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Misinformation Combat Alliance (MCA) and Meta have announced that a dedicated fact-checking helpline on WhatsApp - aimed at combating deepfakes and deceptive AI-generated content - will be available for the public in March 2024.

The pledge to crack down on deepfakes comes at a time when the world's largest democracy is preparing for general elections. Lok Sabha elections are due in April-May this year.

Bharat Gupta, President, Misinformation Combat Alliance, said Deepfakes Analysis Unit (DAU) will serve as a critical and timely intervention to arrest the spread of AI-enabled disinformation among social media and internet users in India.

MCA is a cross-industry alliance bringing companies, organisations, institutions, industry associations and entities together to collectively fight misinformation and its impact. It currently has 16 members including fact-checking organisations, media outlets, and civic tech.

MCA-Meta collaboration will allow MCA and its associated network of independent fact-checkers and research organisations to address viral misinformation – particularly deep fakes.

They will work closely with member fact-checking organisations as well as industry partners and digital labs to assess and verify the content and respond to the messages accordingly,

The program is based on detection, prevention, reporting and driving awareness around the spread of deep fakes***PHOTO: FREEPIK***

debunking false claims and misinformation.

According to the release, the program is based on a four-pillar approach – detection, prevention, reporting and driving awareness around the escalating spread of deep fakes along with building a critical instrument that allows citizens to access reliable information to fight the spread of such misinformation.

With millions of Indian users on WhatsApp, the collaboration between Meta and MCA marks a continued effort to empower users with tools to verify information on its service.

It is also pertinent to mention here that the government talked tough with social media platforms on the issue of 'deep fake' amid concerns of weaponisation of technology for creating doctored content and harmful narratives.

—PTI

Shubman Gill is Punjab 'state icon' for LS polls

CHANDIGARH, 19 FEB

The Punjab Chief Electoral Officer's office has designated Indian cricketer Shubman Gill as a "state icon" for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

In a statement, Chief Electoral Officer Sibin C said on Monday that Gill will engage in various campaigns aimed at voter awareness to ensure a voting percentage of 70 per cent. The poll panel has set the target of "Is Vaar 70 Paar". Punjab had recorded a voter turnout of 65.96 in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls for the 13 seats.

The CEO said Punjab-resident Gill, popular among sports enthusiasts, especially the youth, has been appointed as a "state icon" for the polls. Sibin C said that in a meeting with all deputy commissioners of Punjab on Friday, they were asked to identify such areas where the voting percentage was low during the last elections. *—PTI*

NZ women win Oceania event to qualify for Olympics

WELLINGTON, 19 FEB

New Zealand will compete in the women's football tournament at the Paris Olympic Games after beating the Solomon Islands 11-1 in the final of the Oceania qualifying tournament on Monday in Apia, Samoa. Hannah Wilkinson, who scored the first goal of the Women's World Cup in New Zealand and Australia last year, was one of four players to score twice for New Zealand. The others were Grace Jale, Indiah-Paige Riley, and Katie Kitching. New Zealand led 5-0 at halftime. The final saw New Zealand continue its dominance of a tournament in which it scored 32 goals and conceded two in five matches. New Zealand is the sixth team to qualify for the Olympic women's tournament after host France, Canada, United States, Brazil and Colombia. Australia and Japan are expected to qualify for the 12-team tournament later this month. *—AP*

Paddlers Diya, Swastika to get foreign training

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

The Sports Ministry's Mission Olympic Cell has given its go-ahead to paddlers Diya Chitale and Swastika Ghosh to travel to South Korea and Japan for advanced-level training. While Diya will head for Paju-si in South Korea to train under Shin Min Sung, Swastika will be coached by Qiu Jian Xin in Osaka, Japan. The MOC also approved proposals for competition for shuttlers Kiran George and Anupama Upadhaya, doubles women's team of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand and shooter Rudrankksh Patil. While Kiran and Anupama will participate in the BWF Orleans Masters, the pair of Treesa and Gayatri along with their coach and physio will head to Germany to compete in the BWF German Open. *—PTI*

Facundo Díaz wins his first title at Argentina Open

BUENOS AIRES, 19 FEB

Wild card Facundo Díaz Acosta won his first ATP singles title on Sunday by beating Chile's Nicolás Jarry 6-3, 6-4 in the final of the clay-court Argentina Open. The ATP said that the 23-year-old Argentine became only the second left-handed champion — after Rafael Nadal — at the Buenos Aires tournament. Díaz Acosta began the week with a career-high ranking of 87. He is set to rise to No 59 when the rankings are released Monday. "This is yet to sink in," Díaz Acosta told raucous fans. "I have dreamed about this moment for a long time, working with my team and having my family to back me. It is a dream come true that this happened in Argentina." Third-seeded Jarry was chasing his fourth ATP title. *—AP*

How Sarfaraz mastered spin: 500 balls per day

The 26-year-old Sarfaraz got his Test cap after 15 years

The journey of Sarfaraz Khan is the culmination of over 15 years of hard work that involved playing 500 deliveries everyday under his zealous father Naushad Khanvo **PHOTO: PTI**

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Sarfaraz Khan's dominating performance against England's spinners in just his debut Test was no fluke. It was the culmination of over 15 years of hard work that involved playing 500 deliveries everyday under the watchful eyes of his zealous father Naushad Khan.

With two confident half centuries in his debut Test in Rajkot, Sarfaraz has shown that he is here to stay in the Indian team.

The 26-year-old got his Test cap after years of toiling in the domestic circuit and also honing his skills at his father's 'Macho Cricket Club'.

The hard work and systematic planning of the past few years, especially during the two Covid-19 lockdowns, paid off against the likes of Tom Hartley, Joe Root and Rehan Ahmed in Rajkot.

"It has taken playing 500 deliveries per day from off, leg and left-arm spinners across Oval, Cross and Azad Maidans in Mumbai," said a coach who has seen the Mumbaikar's growth from close quarters. "... during (Covid) lockdown, he undertook a car journey covering 1600km. From Mumbai to Amroha, Moradabad, Meerut, Kanpur, Mathura and Dehradun, he travelled and played on proverbial 'akhadas' where the ball turns square with one shooting up and few staying down," he added.

The Sarfaraz that was manoeuvring the spinners with ease, honed his skills the tough way. The credit for the final product lies not just with Naushad though.

Coaches of Bhuvneshwar Kumar (Sanjay Rastogi), Mohammed Shami (Badruddin Sheikh), Kuldeep Yadav (Kapil Deo Pandey), Gautam Gambhir (Sanjay Bhardwaj) and father of India A captain Abhimanyu Easwaran (RP Easwaran) have also contributed in their little way to make Sarfaraz a finished product.

"During lockdown, Naushad called me as we are both from Azamgarh and we played club cricket in Mumbai when I was employed with the Indian Navy. So, when he wanted his son to get practice, I felt it's my duty," Kapil Pandey, coach said.

Shami's coach Badruddin also spoke about his part in helping Sarfaraz attain mastery of spin. *—PTI*

Bumrah likely to be rested for Ranchi Test

RAJKOT, 19 FEB

Lead India pacer Jasprit Bumrah is likely to be rested, while batter K L Rahul is expected to come back after recovering from a quadriceps injury, in the fourth Test against England beginning February 23 in Ranchi.

Bumrah is the leading wicket-taker in the five-match series with 17 scalps and singlehandedly bowled India to victory in the second Test. The hosts lead 2-1 in the five-match rubber. "The team will travel to Ranchi tomorrow and Bumrah is likely to be given rest," said a BCCI source while also informing that Rahul is nearing full fitness and should be a part of the squad in Ranchi.

The decision to rest Bumrah doesn't come as a surprise considering he bowled 80.5 overs in the first three Tests. As part of workload management, India had also rested Mohammed Siraj from the second Test in Visakhapatnam before he returned to play a part in India's record 434 run win over the visitors in Rajkot on Sunday.

India are well-placed to seal the series in Ranchi but if they are not able to, the home team will desperately need the services of Bumrah for the fifth and final Test in Dharamsala beginning 7 March. Rahul, who missed the second and third Test after complaining of pain in his right quadriceps, had reached 90 percent fitness, according to an insider. *—PTI*

Bumrah is the leading wicket-taker in the five-match series with 17 scalps **PHOTO: PTI**

England ex-captain slams 'Bazball'

London, 19 Feb

Former England captains Nasser Hussain and Michael Vaughan have criticised the team's 'Bazball' approach in the ongoing Test series against India, saying the visitors need to apply themselves based on match situation instead of being guided by a one-dimensional philosophy of aggression. India registered their biggest-ever Test win, annihilating England by 434 run in the third Test in Rajkot on Sunday. Chasing 557 to win, the tourists were bundled out for 122. The home side leads 2-1 in the five-match series with games left in Ranchi and Dharamsala. "This was the worst defeat under (Ben) Stokes and Brendon McCullum, and one that exposed their method. They cannot take the aggressive at every opportunity, they have to pick their moments," Vaughan wrote in his column for "Telegraph.co.uk'. Hussain echoed the sentiment. "Bazball is about being attacking but it is also about soaking up pressure," Hussain said on 'Sky Sports'. *—PTI*

Madrid held to 1-1 draw at Vallecano

MADRID, 19 FEB

Real Madrid could see its Spanish league lead reduced after being held to a 1-1 draw at Rayo Vallecano on Sunday, while last-place Almeria made history for the wrong reason by becoming the first team to go 28 straight games without a league win.

Almeria drew 1-1 at Granada for its 25th consecutive winless game this season. It also hadn't won its last three matches last season.

Madrid was frustrated in its first match since it emerged that Kylian Mbappé will leave Paris Saint-Germain at the end of the season, opening the door for another attempt by the Spanish powerhouse to sign the France star.

Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti was asked if all the talk about the possible signing of Mbappé had affected his team.

"When has this team lacked concentration?" Ancelotti said.

"It's tough to say anything bad about this team this season." Joselu put Madrid ahead only three minutes into the match against its southern Madrid rival, but the hosts equalized through a penalty kick converted by Raúl de Tomás in the 27th.

The draw moved Madrid six points clear of second-place Girona, which visits fifth-place Athletic Bilbao on Monday. Third-place Barcelona, which won 2-1 at Celta Vigo on Saturday with a stoppage-time penalty kick converted by Robert Lewandowski, was eight points behind Madrid.

Fourth-place Atletico Madrid, which routed Las Palmas 5-0 at home Saturday, was 11 points off the lead. *—AP*

Janneke's future as women's hockey coach lies in limbo

New Delhi, 19 Feb

Indian women's hockey team chief coach Janneke Schopman's days are numbered as she is unlikely to get an extension after her contract expires in July this year for failing to produce results, including the side's failure to qualify for the Paris Olympics. Schopman, who was the analytical coach in Indian women team's historic fourth-place finish in Tokyo Olympics, took over the reins of the national team after Spaniard Sjoerd Marijne's departure just after the quadrennial event. "Her contract ends in July-August. Let us see what happens, I can't tell anything at this point of time," a HI source told PTI. It is, however, learnt that Schopman is unlikely to get an extension. The Dutch player-turned-coach's best result with the Indian team was the bronze medals that the side won at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games and the 2023 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China. But barring that feat, Schopman has nothing more to show as the Savita Punia-led side failed to win the gold at the Asian Games, which would have directly sealed its berth at the Paris Olympics. *—PTI*

A GOLDEN KISS

Men's Singles' runner-up South Korea's Seongchan Hong and winner Italy's Stefano Napolitano pose for photos at the presentation ceremony during the Bengaluru Open 2024 ATP Challenger Tour at the Karnataka State Lawn Tennis Association, in Bengaluru, Karnataka **PHOTO: PTI**

World TT Championships: Indian women's blank Uzb 3-0

BUSAN, 19 FEB

Archana defeated Rimma Gufranov 11-7, 11-3, 11-6, while Manika stormed past Markhabo Magdieva 11-7, 11-4, 11-1 **PHOTO: AIR**

Indian women's team eased past Uzbekistan while the men endured successive defeats with the loss to South Korea in the World Table Tennis Team Championships here on Monday.

Ayhika Mukherjee and Sreeja Akula were rested from the rubber, providing an opportunity to Archana Kamath and Diya Chitale. They both won their respective singles while senior teammate Manika Batra also had it easy against her opponent to make it a 3-0 win for India.

Archana defeated Rimma Gufranov 11-7, 11-3, 11-6, while Manika stormed past Markhabo Magdieva 11-7, 11-4, 11-1. Diya on the other hand faced tough resistance before prevailing over Rozalina Khadjieva 11-6, 10-12, 11-4, 11-6.

Having started off their campaign with a 2-3 loss to China, Indian women's team now have secured two wins on the trot to occupy second spot in the Group 1 standings. They will next face Spain in their concluding Group 1 league fixture on Tuesday. They earlier defeated Hungary 3-2.

The men's team of veteran Sharath Kamal, reigning national champion Harmeet Desai and G Sathiyan lost their respective singles to go down meekly in its third group stage tie against third seeds Korea.

Harmeet, who is India's top-ranked player at 67, went down to world number 14 Jang Woojin 4-11, 10-12, 8-11. Sathiyan was then brushed aside by world number 16 Lim Jonghoon 5-11, 7-11, 7-11.

Sharath managed to put up a fight, taking the second game but couldn't capitalise on the momentum losing 9-11, 11-8, 6-11, 5-11 to Lee San Su. After winning their opening tie against Chile, Indian men lost 1-3 to Poland on Sunday. *—PTI*

Our team balance has improved: RCB's Mandhana

NEW DELHI, 19 FEB

Smriti Mandhana **PHOTO: RCB**

RCB skipper Smriti Mandhana says her team's balance has improved considerably after acquiring new players and it should help them do a better job in the second season of the Women's Premier League (WPL), starting 23 February.

Royal Challengers Banaglore had endured a tough inaugural season in 2023 as it lost six of the eight matches and finished fourth in five-team competition. The second season will be played in New Delhi and Bengaluru.

RCB had spent close to 2.5 crore to acquire services of many impact players like Ekta Bisht (left-arm spinner), Kate Cross (pacer), Georgia Wareham (leg-spinner), Sabbineni Meghana (all-rounder), Simran Bahadur (medium-pacer), Sophie Molineux (left-arm spinner) and home-grown talent Shubha Satheesh (all-rounder).

"I would definitely want it to be better than the first season. From RCB's point of view, quite a few players were released and we brought in new players. So, the balance has improved for sure, and we are hoping to live up to our potential," Mandhana told JioCinema. The team had released seven players: Komal Zanzad, Poonam Khemnar, Preeti Bose, Sahana Pawar, Dane van Niekerk, Erin Burns, and Megan Schutt.

The stylish batter said playing the domestic season has not only prepared her well for the upcoming WPL, it also she helped her identify a few good players. "Playing in the domestic season helped me practice well and we saw quite a few girls against whom we've not played previously. I was able to recommend a few names to my franchise after seeing these girls." *—PTI*

Vidarbha grabbed six points from what was their fifth win in the tournament to finish on top of Group A **PHOTO: X/ SACHIN RT**

F1 PRE-SEASON TESTING

Red Bull team prepares for new season

BAHRAIN, 19 FEB

Red Bull will be the focus of attention when Formula 1 pre-season testing starts this week in Bahrain- for reasons both on track and off.

For one thing, the future of team principal Christian Horner is in doubt as a result of an internal investigation being conducted by Red Bull into allegations that the 50-year-old has engaged in inappropriate and controlling behaviour towards a female colleague.

For another, the car Red Bull unveiled at the team's Milton Keynes base last Thursday was a bit of a "wow" moment, even if chief technical officer Adrian Newey insisted that he did not consider it to be any kind of enormous step forward.

The 10 teams have just three days of testing to prepare for the start of the season and can run only one car at a time. So each driver should have no more than a day and a half to become acquainted with his new car in Bahrain. Two-time champion

Fernando Alonso was bemoaning this at the launch of his Aston Martin car a week or so ago. The Spaniard called the paucity of running "unfair".

Alonso is guaranteed to be at the centre of attention this season, given the vacancy at Mercedes next season following Lewis Hamilton's decision to switch to Ferrari. As

Max verstappen with the Red Bull team engineer inspecting the car in Baharin track on Monday **PHOTO: X/RED BULL RACING**

Alonso put it: "There are three world champions on the grid and I am the only one available."

But the driver market is a discussion for a little way down the road. Right now, even the stars without a seat for 2025 will be focused more on their new steeds than their futures. Normally, it is hard to divine a clear picture of relative performance from pre-season testing because of the variables of fuel loads, engine modes, track condition, tyres and so on. But last year, the fact that Red Bull's RB19 was in a league of its own was clear from pretty much its first serious run.

By the end of the three days last year, the identity of the 2023 world champion was in not even the slightest doubt, even if no-one expected Max Verstappen and Red Bull to produce the most dominant season in F1 history. *—BBC News*

- Fernando Alonso was bemoaning this at the launch of his Aston Martin car a week or so ago

Vidarbha qualify for Ranji knockout stage

NAGPUR, 19 FEB

Spin bowling all-rounder Aditya Sarwate produced another impressive show as Vidarbha registered a comfortable 115-run win over Haryana on the fourth and final day to qualify for the Ranji Trophy quarterfinals from group A, here Monday.

Vidarbha (33) grabbed six points from what was their fifth win in the tournament to finish on top of Group A and were followed by Saurashtra (29).

Sarwate, who had scored 99 in the first innings, made a valuable 42 in the second essay to help Vidarbha add 92 runs to their overnight total of 113/4. They set the visitors a victory target of 296 after being dismissed for 205 in 71.4 overs.

Vidarbha then dished out a superlative bowling effort with left-arm spinner Sarwate also starring with the ball, taking two wickets for 38 runs to go with his first-innings figures of 3/59.

Off-spinner Akshay Wakhare (3/30) snapped three as the hosts bundled out Haryana for 180 in 34.3 overs. Pacer Umesh Yadav (2/37), Aditya Thakare (1/47) and Yash Thakur (1/21) were the other wicket-takers.

Chasing the total, Haryana failed to capitalise on the starts and lost wickets at regular intervals to be reduced to 113 for 5 in the 25th over. *—PTI*